

## VISUAL ART

# A BIG BANK STATEMENT



**Monumental 'IOU/USA,' installed near the Fed, is a timely commentary on fiscal policies.**

By ALICE THORSON  
The Kansas City Star

**A** new monument with attitude awaits visitors to Kansas City's Memorial Park over the next four weeks.

Towering over the park's existing bronze memorials is a huge wall composed of 105 cargo containers. And it has a message.

The containers are mostly red, white and blue, and the white ones have been placed to spell out "IOU" on one side and "USA" on the other. The occasional green container prompts thoughts of money, especially as the 65-foot-tall structure stands across from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City.

Noted sculptor John Salvest created the temporary installation as a project for Grand Arts, and considering the nation's struggle with debt on all levels — from personal home foreclosures to the recent downgrade of the nation's credit rating — the timing is spot on.

So is the location near the bank, which wasn't thrilled with the project when it was informed about it in spring of 2010.

"The Fed has no true jurisdiction over the park, which is city-owned land, but it did what it could to block the project, up to a point," Grand Arts artistic director Stacy Switzer writes in her essay for the exhibit brochure. "Once it became clear that Grand Arts and the artist were willing to fight publicly for the project on First Amendment grounds the dust settled."

And the relationship improved, with Grand Arts agreeing to allow the Fed to use its canine explosive detection unit to inspect the empty containers.

Art collector Larry Meeker, a retired vice president of the Kansas City Fed, thinks "IOU/USA" offers "a great opportunity to engage people in a conversation about what the Fed does and its role in money."

As Salvest has noted, the Fed is "one of the main components of national fiscal and monetary policy," and his project "comes at a time when concern about the United States' ballooning federal budget and foreign trade deficits is a major part of the national conversation."

Salvest boasts an extensive exhibition record at galleries and museums around the country. He also has fulfilled a long list of commissions, including a recent 120-foot-long piece incorporating 14,000 one-of-a-kind business cards for Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport.

But "IOU/USA" is his biggest project to date. It fulfills a dream he has had since his 20s, when he worked at his native New Jersey's Port Newark and thought, "someday it would be cool to do something with these."



In late August, Belger Cartage Service used a big crane to install the cargo containers for artist John Salvest's "IOU/USA" project.

E.G. SCHEMPF



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## ON EXHIBIT

"John Salvest: New Cornucopia and the Big IOU" continues through Oct. 16. "IOU/USA" is open 24 hours daily at Memorial Hill Park. "New Cornucopia" is on view at Grand Arts, 1819 Grand Blvd., 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Thursday and Friday and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday. For more information, call 816-421-6887 or visit [www.grandarts.com](http://www.grandarts.com).

Ⓜ Watch a time-lapse video of "IOU/USA" being assembled at [KansasCity.com/entertainment](http://KansasCity.com/entertainment).

The wall of containers stands across from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City in Memorial Park.



The piece took two weeks and a crew of five men to install, with Salvest overseeing the placement of the containers so that the letters had maximum impact.

Despite its mammoth size, "IOU/USA" marks a continuation of the artist's history of incorporating units and texts into works that make critical commentary about U.S. policy.

Salvest is well-known for pieces based on the U.S. map — in 2004, he made a room-sized one out of colorful plastic container lids. Another recurrent motif is the U.S. flag, which he has rendered in everything from used cigarette butts and matches, to bullets and pills.

In "IOU/USA," the dominant motif is the grid, emblem of modernism and the ordering system of 20th-century industrial production.

The containers themselves, invented in the mid-1950s in a bid to increase efficiency and reduce the expense of shipping by standardizing the units of transport, exemplify this industrial ordering system and its assembly-line uniformity.

Yet the battered condition of the containers in "IOU/USA" hints at the demise of the model that governed a manufacturing economy. Their emptiness points to a post-industrial, post-manufacturing economy based on information and services.

"We're in this bit of a mess," Salvest said in an interview at Grand Arts. "Surely it's temporary. We will adapt to the changing world situation; I wish we could be moving more quickly."

In a recent interview, Switzer was



FROM THE ARTIST

**Salvest spent months doing research for the project, which is sponsored by Kansas City's Grand Arts contemporary art space.**

pleased to report that families are using "IOU/USA" as a picnic destination and said she hopes the piece will attract political gatherings. "We're really interested in the idea that different groups would use 'IOU/USA' as a backdrop," she said.

In the meantime, off-duty police officers have been serving as the work's "unofficial ambassadors."

"We have docents up there on Thursday, Friday and Saturday after-

noon," Switzer said. "When we're not there, the cops have been doing a really nice job of explaining what it is to people."

In the gallery at Grand Arts, Salvest has installed a single cargo container, which he has filled to bursting with consumer goods — toys and clothing, televisions and dinnerware, plastic fruit, a snowblower — that spill out onto the floor. The sides of the container are emblazoned with the label



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**Salvest's "New Cornucopia," a single container filled with goods imported from China, is on view at the gallery at Grand Arts.**

"China Shipping," and all of the products it contains, even a plastic Pillsbury doughboy, were made in China. It's titled "New Cornucopia."

Salvest indulges his flair for irony in this piece, which was triggered in part by a visit to the Money Museum during the planning stages for the container project.

The brochure includes his recollection: "Each third grader in the tour group was given a Money Museum

Fun Guide and a little green box of colored pencils. Printed on one side of the box was Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City and on the other Made in China."

Salvest's Grand Arts project gives viewers plenty to chew on, and that little incident puts the icing on the cake.

To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4763 or send email to [athorson@kcstar.com](mailto:athorson@kcstar.com).

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