

LOCAL ART ENCLAVES FIND A YOUNG AUDIENCE

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As you walk into the beige-everything-except-the-entables Linden Art Gallery in Kroger Plaza, you will see it, glossy and conspicuous, lying there on one of the brown endtables — a copy of the gallery's very own bimonthly magazine, "Exhibit." Take a flip through and you'll find that the longest (and loudest) article isn't on Van Gogh or Wyeth, but rather Coca-Cola, Slick-O hair tonic and Nitrates Agencies Genuine Peruvian Guano — the oh-so-chic area that comprises "Advertising Art."

It's this mass-produced art that has made it big in America — not paintings hanging quietly in estates of the wealthy, but the art of car grilles and billboards and Campbell's Soup. Yet amid this assault of the assembly line, hidden discreetly in the nooks and crannies of Chapel Hill in places like the Linden Gallery, good old-fashioned, original art is shown and sold. In fact, with about 10 commercial galleries around town, art in Chapel Hill has become quite a business.

It's a business that's tucked away in places like a warm wooden house on Cameron Avenue, a couple of blocks from campus. It's sold not by high-powered dealers, but by people like Libba Beerman, an energetic woman who has loved art for many decades, and who has seen changes over the years. "It's a less elitist form nowadays," she notes. Indeed, art dealers in the area stress that they sell not to the fabulously well-to-do, but primarily to younger, less wealthy clients. It seems there is art to be found somewhere between New York's Guggenheim and the poster rack at Schoolkids' Records.

The walls of Beerman's home on Cameron Street are graced by painting after painting in what was, three years ago, a dining room, a den and an upstairs bedroom — but what is now a place of business. That conversion has been by no means a simple task. On the one hand one must choose which artists to exhibit. "The telltale sign for a real artist is that he can't help from creating," Beerman says. "I'm an artist, but I'm not driven to paint or sculpt. I always thought I had to wash the dishes." On the other hand, one must run a business: "As romantic as it is to live

with this art, there's an amazing amount of busi-ness — doing PR work, keeping the accounts."

Her efforts are not going unrewarded, however. Beerman sold about 200 works of art last year — mostly sculpture and paintings — for as much as \$1200 or as little as \$25 for each. Those, she says, are strictly Chapel Hill prices: "In New York it's a joke. This is the place to buy art . . . art is becoming more viable in regions." She gestures to painting after painting: "Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill." She pauses, then adds, "We've got a lot of talent in this town."

And the town, she says, is slowly beginning to recognize that talent. "There is an uphill battle for art in this area . . . this area has been more literary and not as visually oriented. That is changing. The town is slowly catching up to the idea that there is merit in art."

Chapel Hill residents of all varieties have come to realize the merit and beauty of another house-turned-art gallery, according to Libby Daniels, manager of the Horace Williams House on East Rosemary Street. "Sometimes the neighborhood dogs will wander in . . . we have several honorary dog members of the preservation society," she notes somewhat wistfully. The stately house, dating from the early 1800s, is in effect loaned by the University to the N.C. Preservation Society, which has in turn renovated it and now holds art showings year round.

High wooden ceilings, lots of space and lots of natural light lend the feel of a gallery to the house. Yet as Daniels strolls from room to room, she points out that it was a home for more than a century. "The nice thing about this place is its informality. I literally have people jogging by, and they'll jog in and then jog out." Those who ramble in may take a look at what she terms "a grab bag of exhibits," all of which are for sale by the artists. At the end of the show each artist must donate to the house 20 percent of his proceeds, which goes toward further improvements to the place.

Due to its dollar-a-year rent, the Preservation Society can afford to take the occasional risk on an artist. "We encourage people to be more experimental and creative than they would be with a regular commercial

gallery," Daniels said. "It's a chance for them to expand their horizons." And, she hopes, a chance for members of the community to expand theirs, whether the casual walk-in or the more serious buyer.

Expanding horizons in a variety of directions is what ArtSchool in Carrboro is all about. The art gallery sits squarely in the middle of a newly acquired site, surrounded by a variety of media — theater, music, classes. The clean, sharp, modern lines of this gallery/lobby give it a more formal air than that of the houses. It is also a more public, visible place. Wanda Calhoun, the gallery's director, says the ArtSchool chooses artists carefully. "It gives them a chance to work and show. It's definitely a needed thing."

The current exhibit brings together photography, sculpture and tapestry, all contributing to the theme "Construction Works," which appropriately was delayed due to the dust and debris left in the wake of recent construction. Calhoun, who now volunteers her services to ArtSchool, worked for 20 years at Ackland Art Museum and has seen little art galleries come and go over the years. But she believes that now there are more than ever, including ArtSchool's own "Outreach Galleries," five small shows in places of business such as Hotel Europa and Landlubber's Seafood Restaurant. The increase in the number of commercial galleries indicates more sales and more folks in the area willing to buy.

So what kind of art will provoke normally normal people in this area to fork over big money for big pieces of paper and little lumps of clay? According to Calhoun, ArtSchool's last show, which comprised paintings from the Watercolor Society, sold very well — nine paintings went in all. Daniels says that in the Williams House abstract art often has a difficult time. "In this place realism sells better," she says. She notes the success of a local artist and professor, Ernest Craig, who paints from photographs he's taken all over the world and who sold nearly his entire exhibit.

Beerman agrees that the demand is for realism. "People like to have pictures of their surroundings," she says. "It's crazy, but people want to bring their environment inside. They want to bring that mountain into



DTH/Gretchen Hock

Unlike the smaller galleries in Chapel Hill, ArtsCenter has the capacity to display a variety of sculptures and paintings. ArtsCenter recently relocated to its new facility in Carrboro.

their living room so they can make sure it's there." Apologizing for waxing philosophical, she goes on: "We have a wide variety of style now. There's a whole freedom to allow yourself to like what you like rather than to be told what you like."

Chapel Hill residents seem to be taking advantage of this freedom of choice, and nowhere is their wide variety of taste better evinced than in a cramped room above infamous Hectors on Henderson Street. For there lies "The Arts" gallery, where Ann Thibaut steadily continues to sell the specific art she loves best — French engravings of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Twenty years ago she and her husband took a long trip to Paris, where, she says, "We just sort of went cuckoo — my eyes just popped out of my head." As a result of such cuckooism, they started selling the art of French artists they'd met. She doesn't find it strange that art of such a specific nature sold well — eventually selling enough to start a gallery. Her buyers, however, continue to surprise her: "This is a very unusual place in that it's not the well-to-do that buy from me." Rather, she says, it's a younger market that she attracts. "When people get to my age you've got your living room fixed."

A voice comes from beyond the door. "Hello, is there an art gallery up here?" someone asks. "It's small," she replies. Plants, ceramics, books and lithographs are scattered about the well-lit room, apparently in no fixed order. All are a part of what

Thibaut calls "the miracle of life." She finds that miracle best expressed, though, in the art that she buys and sells. In the end, she says, "The whole business is a treasure."

If the Thibauts sell a rather specific kind of art, the Linden Art Gallery does quite the opposite, offering a true bevy of treasures. Here, amid beige office dividers and studio lights, hang tiny framed Japanese gaming cards, 19th century British watercolors, Egyptian papyrus prints wrapped in plastic and backed by Styrofoam. Everything but car grilles and Coca Cola mirrors.

Rhoda Rangeo, gallery manager, bases her purchases on what she thinks will sell and on who she sees as buyers in the area. "A large portion of our customers are professional, well-traveled people; they've been in museums. The people here are very cosmopolitan . . . they don't settle for poster art."

Judging from the number of local galleries, it seems that poster art doesn't strike the same cord as original art for many in the area. Certainly for the likes of Ann Thibaut, there is no substitute for the real thing. "I feel very deeply a part of a human tradition." After all, she asks, "What lasts when human civilizations crumble?" Her answer can be found in the great art galleries of the world. Yet while this civilization stands, art remains far more than a museum relic. In civilized houses and galleries in and around Chapel Hill, it remains, quietly but steadily, a lively business.



Libba Beerman, the fine arts broker for the 305 W. Cameron Avenue Art Gallery, shows a painting by Walter Piepke



Antiques add to the relaxed atmosphere of the Horace Williams House