

Sometimes It Pays for an Artist To Go It Alone

This is the fourth installment of a weekly series by freelance writer and Southampton Press contributor Pat Rogers on how art is exhibited on the East End.

By Pat Rogers

An artist starting his or her own gallery isn't always about vanity: sometimes it's simply the best way to go. At least, that's how it has turned out for a couple of area artists who started up galleries for themselves.

Typically, artist-owned galleries are founded to exhibit art made by the artist-owner. Sometimes ownership is a sole artist; other times it's a group of artists who band together and run a gallery. In both cases, exhibiting artists with widespread reputations help bring collectors and browsers through the door.

The Paraskevas Gallery in Westhampton Beach, for example, is devoted to the work of Michael Paraskevas and his mother, Betty. Mr. Paraskevas is a celebrated illustrator and painter. He and his mother have created and produced dozens of children's books, television shows, films, cartoon strips and even a puppet show. In addition, the pair have full-length movies in the works and have published 20 children's books.

But Mr. Paraskevas might best be known for his cartoon series, "Junior Kroll" and "Green Monkeys," both published by Dan's Papers. He's also known for his beach paintings inhabited by colorful and whimsical characters. So when the duo open their gallery in Westhampton Beach each evening it's a pretty sure bet they're going to have company.

"This is like our living room," Mr. Paraskevas said. "People come in, they look at the art, they take a seat and stay awhile."

The Celadon Gallery in Water Mill relies on accomplished ceramists to draw attention to the possibilities of clay. The gallery's mission is to exhibit members of the Clay Art Guild of the Hamptons, Inc. and demonstrate the potential of clay. The non-profit organization holds workshops and field trips for members and non-members. They also offer scholarships to learn about the art of clay. And its exhibitions feature national, international and local ceramic artists.

The organization's non-profit status allows it to pair with another non-profit, the Water Mill Museum, to the benefit of both. The Celadon Gallery building is owned by the museum, which cuts the rent to help the gallery meet expenses. In return, the Clay Art Guild holds ceramicsbased fund-raisers to benefit the historic museum next door.

Jade Nectar Gallery East in Southampton also sometimes features artists who have carved out a reputation in order to bring people into the gallery. Last month, it featured the work of actor Burt Young, who played "Paulie" in the Rocky films. The gallery is owned by painter and writer Lana Santorelli.

Besides star power, the gallery holds weekly wine and cheese receptions on Saturday and Wednesday nights (during the summer concert series in Agawam Park) to entice people to view its changing exhibitions. The gallery exhibits art and sculpture by local artists and works by Ms. Santorelli.

In some cases, galleries take “the more the merrier” approach. The Depot Gallery in Montauk exhibits art by members of the Montauk Artists Association. The group opened the gallery because there was no other local exhibition space. The Crazy Monkey Gallery in Amagansett also exhibits art by its membership. The gallery is an artist cooperative, with accepted artists signing on for a year’s worth of wall space. Art, jewelry and sculpture is exhibited in themed shows that change monthly.

Having multiple artist members makes for well-attended openings and foot traffic from collectors, friends and family. Word of mouth travels faster when more people are talking. A mini-artistic community is forged from current and former members of the co-op.

Whether the gallery is owned by one person or 50, having a gallery means there’s no shortage of regular wall space. In most cases, artists get to show a body of work instead of a painting or two. Artist-owned galleries are often more likely to take chances on new or emerging artists and those artists are often on hand to talk about the work.

“They can ask me anything about the art and the emotions behind it, like what I was feeling when I painted it and the meaning behind it,” said Michael Perez of Michael Perez Pop Art Gallery. “I can answer questions about whatever they want to know.

“Except for art openings, you’re not going to find that in commercial galleries.”

Owning your own gallery means the artist has to learn the business side of the operation.

“It was difficult in the beginning,” said Mrs. Santorelli. “As an artist, you’re focused on painting and creativity. When you open your own gallery, you have to be a business person, too.”

Having a business means arranging for staff, becoming a salesperson and adhering to regular operating hours. It also means making sure enough art sells to meet the rent and other expenses. Sometimes that means getting a little creative. Mr. Perez started creating art on clothing in addition to selling his original pop art paintings. His clothing art includes designer jeans, T-shirts and leather jackets.

At the Paraskevas Gallery, Michael and Betty always make sure buyers of their children’s books walk away with a special added something—books are signed by Betty, who authored them, and Michael, who often draws one of his trademark characters to go with his signature.



Artist Lana Santorelli among her paintings currently on view at the Jade Nectar Gallery East in Southampton. **PAT ROGERS**