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Art gallery offers view of creative process
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SOUTHBRIDGE — The Sevensgait's studio and gallery is like a zoo with artists instead of animals, except that the artists aren't kept behind cages, and they don't mind being disturbed.

Visitors to Sevensgait's, which opened late last month within the renovated industrial complex at 12 Crane Street, can feel free to observe artists in their natural habitat without fear of causing a distraction.

"Most of the artists leave the doors open, so people can converse with them or see what they happen to be working on," said co-owner Demetri Kasperson. "We're going to try to keep that as a condition of being in here."

Kasperson and fellow co-owner Monika Agnello met as art students at Rhode Island School of Design. Two years ago, after Agnello had displayed some of her paintings at the nearby Sturbridge Coffee Roasters Café, the duo was invited to run an art facility by Gabriel McCarthy, who has helped to spearhead redevelopment projects on and around Crane Street.

Escorted to the space McCarthy envisioned for the artist enclave — a box-laden section of the old industrial structure once used as a dog food cannery — they were left with the challenge of visualizing how that enclave might be carved out.

Today, the space is divided into sections for displaying artwork — and creating it. Up the stairs from the gallery space is a hallway leading to seven individual studios.

"We designed the studios so they can be opened to one another, so you can really get a sense of collaboration," Kasperson said.

Kasperson and Agnello, both painters, inhabit two of the studios. Three others are occupied by Rachel Lemoine, a jeweler who has owned a store on Block Island; Shaun Conroy, a glass designer currently engaged in restoring the town fountain of Wales; and Antonio Fonseca Vasquez, an artistic jack-of-all-trades recently commissioned to produce 100 paintings in 30 days.

In actuality, Vasquez is painting once large picture that will be divided into 100 pieces and distributed to bank and business executives in South America.



Matt Reynolds photo
Abstract painter Demetri A. Kasperson, a co-owner of Sevensgait's art gallery and studio, works on a project Monday.
(click for larger version)

The final two studios are reserved for resident artists, hailing from foreign countries or elsewhere in the United States, who will spend time creating at Sevensgait before displaying the fruits of their labors in the gallery.

Even promising art students from local colleges can take a crack at landing a term as a resident artist.

"Our idea is to have a diverse group of artists, all working on a regular basis, and as a result of that we can get a diverse product for people to look at," Kasperson said.

Currently on display are Boston-based Noelle Nevolo's expressionist portraits of her friends and family, elegant dresses designed by Southbridge native Eddi Phillips and the works of Northhampton's Ariel Kotker, who is crafting replicas of the typical knick knacks found in a childhood bedroom — a sneaker and a wiffle ball, for instance — for use in a future exhibit.

"One of the main goals of running Sevensgait is to give people access to contemporary art that they normally don't get unless they're in an urban setting," Kasperson said.

On Aug. 2, before the existing collection is retired and replaced by another, Sevensgait is hosting a closing reception from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m., and the hope is for all three artists to be available to field questions and comments.

"We want people to be able to interact with the artists," Kasperson said, "so they can understand why the artists are doing what they are doing, which I think in contemporary art often gets lost."

Most collections will be on display in the Sevensgait gallery for about a month, at which point the items will be dispersed either to viewers who purchased them or, failing that, returned to the artist.

Kasperson and Agnello said sale prices would vary, with the cheapest creations going for less than \$100 and the more expensive ones bringing in upwards of \$1,000. Proceeds go to the artists, although Sevensgait does claim a portion as a commission.

A sculpture outside the building, done by local artists John Ferrara and Balthasar Sanchez, depicts a trio of cranes jumbled together. Entitled "Silent Spring," the sculpture pays homage to the environmentalist tome of that name penned by Rachel Carson in the early 1960s.

The Sevensgait owners share McCarthy's enthusiasm that the revamped Crane Street complex is well positioned to succeed.

"A real hope is that this part of Southbridge can become a small cultural district," Kasperson said.

"We're really hoping this can act as a magnet for attracting artists, artisans and other businesses to the area, revitalizing the town through culture and through the arts. We really think Southbridge has an enormous amount of potential."

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