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Art gallery aims to create community
Sevengaits founders see arts potential in Southbridge

by [GUS STEEVES](#)
[NEWS STAFF WRITER](#)

SOUTHBRIDGE — To most people, Southbridge is a blue-collar, somewhat economically depressed mill town.

Not to Demetri Kasperson and Monika Agnello — they see it as a place with the potential to become an artistic attraction.

With that in mind, the pair started the Sevengaits Project Space on Crane Street, an arts community in an unmistakable big silver building, earlier this summer.

"A lot of people feel it's like a New York arts gallery," Agnello said. "It's great to be in a small town and have the feeling of walking into a space and having the quality of work you see in a big city."

In part, that feeling is what they're aiming for. Agnello, a New York City native, connected with Kasperson, a Woodstock native, at the Rhode Island School of Design and moved to the Big Apple, where they lived for several years. Since coming here, they've started connecting to the local arts scene. They said they've been surprised to find people from various places — Northampton, Boston, Providence, Buffalo, New Jersey — wanting to make the drive to Southbridge to see their gallery and others who stop by just because they were touring the town.

One key person for them has been building owner Gabriel McCarthy, who is also creating a new restaurant and brewery in the building and a bike trail behind it. Kasperson said McCarthy met them just after he'd returned from Ireland, where he'd seen the effects of cultural renewal in several towns.

After visiting Agnello's art show at the nearby Sturbridge Coffee Roasters, McCarthy liked what he saw and encouraged them to share their concept of what a gallery could be. He then knocked down a wall and expanded his building to help make it happen, Kasperson said.

"He believes strongly in the arts and that it's one way to revitalize this town. ... He was very flexible with us; we basically laid it out with rolls of insulation and tape," Kasperson said. "We saw it as not just a space to show art, but as a space for people to interact."



Gus Steeves photo
Demetri Kasperson, with part of
the upcoming show hanging
beside him. (*click for larger
version*)

Some of the events they hope to host include cooperative projects, classes (they already have figure drawing sessions), and even scientific and cultural discussions or lectures. They also offer six small studios to local artists, presently occupied by painters, a glassblower and a jeweler.

"I think there will be a shift among artists to move to a small-town setting, because it's easier to create communities," Kasperon said. "... We think a lot of creativity can come out of this, not just for us, but for the whole community."

Both of them are painters, and Kasperon said they especially look for artists who are "really innovative ... people willing to experiment do non-conventional things or conventional things in non-conventional ways."

Exactly what that means, however, is somewhat hard to define; he admitted it's "subjective."

"When you're looking through things, certain paintings really stand out," he said. "... They have a style that says no one else could do the paintings. A person's identity really comes through the work."

Kasperon and Agnello started working on the site about a year ago, when the building was "dark, and the walls were corrugated metal," Agnello said. Before they took it over, their space was mostly storage for a canning company; now it has a high ceiling with skylights, white walls, and rather oddly-shaped spaces that might challenge artists seeking to create big installations.

Some of the equipment and furniture, they said, were donated by American Optical Co. just before it moved its last division south.

The project is the pair's first effort at running their own studio, with both having previously rented space or worked out of their homes. Kasperon said he wants to run it as an artist rather than as a businessman, focusing more on the creative process than on selling art.

According to their Web site, their mission is to provide "a bridge between artists, their projects and the community. In developing their work, artists are given a means to connect on a local as well as a global level. By experiencing the creative process, the public gains access to the intention behind the art. This cycle enriches the area intellectually, economically and culturally."

Sevengaits had its first show from June to August, with an opening that featured music, a dress show, and other things. Its second show, called "Stacks/Escape/Construction," featuring the work of Timothy Pearson, Johana Skalsky and Jesse Kahn, opens this Friday from 7 to 11 p.m.

Gus Steeves may be reached at (508) 909-4135, or by e-mail at

gsteeves@stonebridgepress.com