

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

'Mom-and-pop' galleries take root on Lawrenceville's Hatfield Street

By Kurt Shaw
TRIBUNE-REVIEW ART CRITIC
Sunday, April 8, 2007

When Dan Gaser moved to Lawrenceville in 2003, he did so with the idea that he was moving to an artsy, welcoming neighborhood, a place where he could not only spend his weekend afternoons browsing through the fun and funky shops on Butler Street but get to know the shop owners as well.

A fine-art photographer, who has spent the past 35 years working as a middle-school English teacher in the Baldwin-Whitehall School District, Gaser, 56, didn't just want to witness Lawrenceville's burgeoning art scene first-hand; he wanted to contribute to it.

So, a little more than a year later, he bought a small storefront building on the corner of 48th and Hatfield Street, a few blocks toward the river from Butler Street, in what might be considered a light industrial neighborhood that's a combination of warehouses, old storefronts and row houses.

Built in the 1800s, Gaser's building originally was a boardinghouse, then a speakeasy, beer distributor, VCR repair shop and, ultimately, Section 8 housing.

Gaser bought the property with the idea of turning it into an art gallery and living space for himself. After tearing into it in June 2005, he opened the gallery space in October, teaching photography classes there and exhibiting art by local artists.

While Gaser was busy renovating the property, Elizabeth Monoian was busy doing the same thing down the street.

That same year, Monoian, a new-media and performance artist, had purchased two houses along Hatfield Street, which runs from 44th to 50th streets, as well as a vacant lot on nearby Harrison Street. Monoian and her twin sister, Barbara Monoian, were planning a little art venture of their own called the Society for Cultural Exchange, and the Lawrenceville properties seemed a perfect place as "headquarters" for the project.

Originally from the Seattle area, Monoian, 37, first found out about Lawrenceville when she was a graduate student in fine arts at Carnegie Mellon University in the late 1990s.

"When I was living here as a grad student, I would just drive around. Pittsburgh was really unfamiliar to me. It was something that I had never experienced, the whole aesthetic. Pittsburgh was something else outside of the other cities I've lived in," says Monoian who has lived in San Francisco, New York and Seattle.

"Pittsburgh was very unique to me," she says. "So I was intrigued. I really fell in love with the aesthetic and the openness."

After a two-year stint in New York and post-graduate school, Monoian decided to move back to Pittsburgh and settle in Lawrenceville where, she reasoned, she could realistically and affordably complete the projects she was interested in, buy property and have a home that's her own.

She makes her living as a Web designer and teaching classes in new media at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, but she spends the rest of her time collaborating with her sister on the [Society for Cultural Exchange](#). Barbara Monoian lives in Manhattan's East Village, where she works as a set designer, but plans on moving to Lawrenceville in the fall.

The sisters see the 2,500-square-foot, Victorian-style house at 4719 Hatfield St. as just one of the projects operating under the umbrella of their organization. Comprising three floors of exhibition space, with one area cordoned off as living space for visiting artists, they call the converted row house "Musee de Monoian."

To date, they have had numerous visiting artists living and exhibiting in the space, ranging from a small group of Russian students to an Israeli animator. Manhattan-based performance artist Clarinda Mac Low has been living and working on a new project in the space off and on since the fall.

But Gaser and the Monoian sisters aren't the only ones with art galleries along Hatfield Street. Just over a year ago, Dave Calfo opened DNA Blue Collar Gallery in an 8,700-square-foot industrial warehouse he owns at 4717 Hatfield St.

A self-proclaimed "salvage artist" and self-employed historical renovator who has lived and worked in Lawrenceville since 1975, Calfo, 45, bought the building in 2001 with the idea of turning it into apartments for himself and two artists, as well as including a small gallery.

"When I first bought the building, I wanted to open up a gallery and coffee shop," Calfo says, "but I'm not a coffee drinker. That was just kind of an add-on idea, anyhow. But the two apartments are designed for artists, so I always planned on having some form of a gallery."

With one wall made entirely of doors salvaged from various projects Calfo has completed throughout the Lawrenceville area, the gallery sports a massive 5-

by 6-foot skylight and a floor covered with hundreds of colorful footprints.

"If they could talk, they could tell you the history of Lawrenceville," Calfo says of the doors. And of the floor, he says, "Me and seven friends and family got together, (and) we put on a big pot of hot sausage and painted the floor with our footprints."

Like Gaser, he, too, focuses on exhibiting the work of local artists, as well as his own. But he sees all three galleries as something of a community effort.

"We support each other," Calfo says. "The unique thing about Pittsburgh is its neighborhoods. Everybody looks out for each other. You got your porch light on for a reason. We tell each other if something's out of place or even to say, 'Hey, nice flowers.' Same thing holds for the galleries. If one wants to open on a certain night, we'll all say, 'sure,' because it benefits the other two as well. We'll all do mailings and get triple the people coming in."

Gaser agrees.

"We work together, all three of us," he says. "Each one has their thing that they do best. Beth (Monoian) is a promoter, she teaches at Filmmakers and knows a lot of people. I know a lot of people from the photography shows that I do. And Dave (Calfo) knows the neighborhood."

It has paid off, even though Gaser jokes, "It's kind of a destination. People have to know about us to get there. I always tell people, 'If the police are looking for you, come and hide in my gallery, because they're never going to find you down here.'"

Calfo says he has received calls from people who have heard about what's being dubbed "the Hatfield Street Galleries" as far away as Butler. And last month, he sold one of his paintings to someone from New York City who was visiting for the weekend.

"My piece is sitting in New York somewhere now," he says. "I think it's pretty cool."

Having lived in Lawrenceville the longest, Calfo has watched the ups and downs of the neighborhood over the years. He says now it's definitely on the upswing, with no sign of turning back. And he feels the Hatfield Street galleries are contributing to that, even though they're a little off the beaten path. That's why he likens them to the neighborhood stores that once dotted the area, the storefronts of which still can be seen, though covered up or played down for converted housing.

"There are no mom-and-pop stores anymore," he says. "So, I don't know, maybe we're the new mom-and-pop stores, I guess."

"We're trying to do it right," Gaser says. "It's not the search for the almighty dollar. Everybody's really just trying to promote the arts."

Kurt Shaw can be reached at kshaw@tribweb.com or .

Images and text copyright © 2007 by The Tribune-Review Publishing Co.
Reproduction or reuse prohibited without written consent from PghTrib.com