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Centerpiece: Hatfield brings art home

Hatfield Street gallery owners know what it means to be a good neighbor - and that's good for business, too.

By:

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When Michael Divine first thought about moving back to Pittsburgh in the fall of 2006, he asked around about the local art galleries.

"Everyone was talking about Lawrenceville," Divine said.

After visiting a handful of the mushrooming galleries on Butler Street, Divine - who currently DJs on WRCT under the moniker Zombo - was impressed.

He was so impressed, in fact, that he and his wife moved to Lawrenceville from Portland the following April and opened a gallery in the first floor of their Hatfield Street home in July.

By that time, Divine's Zombo Gallery was only the new kid in the neighborhood, but not at a loss for playmates. Though Divine was unaware of them when he purchased his space, three galleries had already



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popped up on Hatfield Street in late 2005 and early 2006.

The street itself runs parallel to Butler Street a few blocks closer to the Allegheny River, and before several galleries moved in, it saw little change after the Heppenstallsteel mill closed in the '80s.

"We are off the beaten path," Dan Gaser, of the Hatfield Street galleries, said. His description is a sentiment all four galleries on the street seem to embrace.



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Gaser, a black-and-white photographer, opened Trinity Gallery with the idea of offering new and upcoming artists their first space to exhibit.

"I'm here as a pioneer of a new thing [to the area], promoting the arts for promising artists," Gaser said. "For 99 percent of the artists [showcasing at Trinity] it's their first time exhibiting."



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Around the same time Gaser was opening his gallery, Elizabeth Monoian was in the process of converting a rowhouse on Hatfield into a living space for an artist-in-residence program. Her venture spawned the Society for Cultural Exchange for various artists to work at and exhibit in a gallery space on the first floor.

The fourth gallery on the street is DNA: Blue Collar Gallery, which is run by David Calfo, a salvage and refuse material artist who showcases his and other local artists' work.

Zombo Gallery may be the most specialized of the Hatfield Street galleries, embracing a dedication to low-brow art.

"It's a lot of '50s and '60s kitsch, monster and hot-rod themed art, pin-up girl posters and anti-art," Divine said of the type of work that's been displayed in his gallery. "I can't think of any other gallery that does what we do."

But as diverse as these galleries are, they're united by a common effort in supporting the arts. While each of the gallery owners thought a Hatfield Street location meant running a lone gallery off the main street, as they discovered each other, they began to band together.

"Dave [Calfo] and I were working on our galleries simultaneously, but neither one of us was aware of it," Gaser explained. "When Beth [Monoian] came along she found out about us and suggested we work together."

Monoian shared in Gaser's surprise to find out she wasn't the only one working on the street to help promote the art.

"It's very uncanny that we all had the same intentions without knowing it," Monoian said. "[What's more amazing] is that we work together beautifully."

In order to draw more of a crowd to the street, the owners of the Hatfield galleries coordinate their events to hold openings on the same day. They also promote one another's galleries, send out mailings for all the Hatfield Street exhibits and do all they can to pull their resources together.

"It gave us strength to have each other," Monoian said.

The relationship runs much deeper than a business arrangement. The Hatfield gallery owners all speak fondly of one another and interact more like good neighbors than partners.

"If there is something that will help the street, then Dave is always there to help," Gaser said, speaking of Calfo's commitment not only to the galleries, but also to the Lawrenceville community, of which he is a native.

"If there is something that needs to be done, he'll do it," Gaser added. "Whether it's helping to prepare [for one of the gallery's upcoming shows] or driving his truck to help one of us out."

"It really is a community thing," Calfo affirmed. "We like our neighbors, and our neighbors like us."

Helene Stokan, a photographer who's exhibiting at Trinity this month, grew up in Lawrenceville. Upon returning to the area a few years ago, she was impressed to find Gaser's gallery.

"I think [the galleries] have revitalized Hatfield Street," Stokan said. "Dan, by working with the people of Lawrenceville, has really expanded and improved the positive image of the community."

The galleries are also deeply involved with the Lawrenceville Corporation, a community development organization that also finds Hatfield Street galleries' dedication to the arts and neighborhood remarkable.

"There's just great energy on Hatfield," Jennifer Kent, the business district manager for the Lawrenceville Corp, said.

"They are just really passionate in that area," Kent added. "They rallied together and aren't just looking out for themselves."

While it was the burgeoning gallery scene on Butler Street that attracted Gaser and Divine to Lawrenceville, they don't imagine their galleries trying to grab attention from the trendier street. Instead, the Hatfield galleries seek to expand the presence of art culture throughout their neighborhood.

"Certainly we hope that people will stray from Butler and find our galleries, but I really think we are doing a different thing," Gaser said.

The presence of a community sentiment on Hatfield Street feels stronger than that on Butler Street. Even though Butler Street galleries coordinate openings and events as well, Gaser sees differences in the two streets.

"We all own our buildings," Gaser said. "A neighborhood [like Lawrenceville] will go downhill and then artists start to move in [because of cheap rent] and things start to pick up again. But when these places become gentrified, the prices go up and the artists and those who rent their gallery space can no longer afford to be here."

While Kent explained that some of Butler Street's galleries were rented spaces and a few were owned, she admitted that it is getting more difficult to secure a space on Butler's prime blocks.

She also saw that the success of galleries like those on Hatfield as a testimony that there will always be room for an artist community in Lawrenceville.

Perhaps Hatfield Street's strong sense of community comes from the permanence they feel they have in the neighborhood. While several galleries have already opened and closed their doors on Butler Street, the Hatfield gallery owners have invested not only in gallery space, but also in their homes.

All of the Hatfield Street gallery owners - Divine, Calfo, Gaser and Monoian - have made their homes in Lawrenceville.

So when Gaser affirms, "We'll be here," he means it.

Society For Cultural Exchange

4729 Hatfield St.

Gallery Hours: By appointment only

www.societyforculturalexchange.org

Owner Elizabeth Monoian is currently working on creating an outdoor electronic media center on Harrison Street in Lawrenceville. "I think doors and walls are sometimes inhibiting to people," said Monoian. "I like the idea of being inclusive with the neighborhood." The Fire Alley Media Center will display electronic artworks and be open 24 hours a day.

This centerpiece feature can be downloaded in PDF format by [clicking here](#).

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