

LabourLove morphs into an art co-op

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After 15 months of hard work, some award-winning exhibitions and their share of

painful business facts, John Pelphrey and his wife Kelly Dew have found a new model for their art gallery. Instead of invitationals to artists to show their work, they have divided up the wall space into three-foot increments, which they are renting to individual artists. In effect, they have morphed a traditional art gallery into an original art co-op.

Along with regular gallery hours and full-time professional sales help, there will be an individual Web page for each artist and monthly themed openings to further publicize the artists. The gallery takes a 10 percent commission, which is minimal. If visitors want to see more work, Pelphrey gives them the artists' contact information. To me, it sounds like a win-win situation for the artists and the gallery.

I did ask Pelphrey why they were still hanging in and he said, "Kelly has had this dream of an art gallery since she was in art school; it has been her passion forever and now it's mine." The art world has a lot of these kinds of folks; art is special and there is nothing sweeter than making the connection between an artist, a work of art and a collector.

Last Friday night, they launched their new idea with a very successful costume party opening. Pelphrey said sales were brisk, pointing out, "Our art is not the most expensive; we are not the place for that, but it is good art and it is original." Next month's theme will be magic; the idea is built around one of the artists who is a magician. If nothing else, the openings, which are part of Third Fridays, offer a fun evening and are free.

At the moment there are 22 artists exhibiting with four more due by the first of the month. The work covers the gamut from oils, to acrylics, to giclees to photographs to fiber to sculpture. There are jewelry makers, several using traditional stones, another who works in metal and another in recycled materials. There are also two clothing designers and Pelphrey said he would like a few more. The artists come from all over the Triangle and as far afield as Greensboro and Wilmington.

As I walked around the gallery, I found names I recognized along with those of newcomers. One, which may surprise some, is Nancy Tuttle May and I talked to her by phone about her decision to join the group. "I met John and Kelly when they first started and now I want to help, so I offered my support, paid my six months in advance and came to the opening masquerade party which was great fun," she said. She talked about the new faces and that it feels good to encourage emerging artists. I passed this collective idea by two other artists, one in Chapel Hill and one in New York, both of whom have day jobs that support their passion for making art. Hands down, the criterion was quality; they both said if the other artists were serious and doing good work, they would join, but they would want to give the idea a little time first.

Among those artists who have jumped in to help launch this new idea are Catherine Howard, who paints faces -- some on cardboard; Beth Palmer, a cancer survivor, who creates beautiful giclee abstracts; Marcy Litle, who paints abstracts that take their cues from Kandinsky; and Jim Senter, whose photograph, "Sacre Coer," is a still life of cast off pamphlets arranged on a Paris sidewalk.

Paige Travis does portraits simulating another era, their faces blurred, as if time has taken its toll. Bethany Bash paints in sharp detail with a pointed message. Her small series here is about drug dependency. Brightly colored birds have picked up, by mistake, drug capsules and forage for them rather than food. Several specimen bottles with birds' feathers inside finish off the series. Kimberly Wheaton paints familiar scenes of Durham. Her "Between Innings" invites the viewer to stand behind some fans as they look out on the ball field.

I rarely broach the economy of art in this column. I write about the art as if it has a life of its own and rarely mention how tough it is for the artists to live off their art and for the gallery owner to make enough to pay the rent. The reality is that the gallery owner offers a center where prospective buyers can see lots of art by different artists in one place. The economy is tough, but when people of like minds hang together they can get a lot done. Amazingly, artists do their art no matter what the economic weather is and the rest of us love to look at it and, if possible, own it. This co-op idea allows artists the maximum exposure for a minimum amount of money and gives us the opportunity to see and possibly own original art at very reasonable prices. It is a good idea. I hope it works.

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