

Jane's addiction

Gallery owners are committed to their craft

BY ORIANA GREEN

The funky, fun, lesbian-owned gallery Plain Jane is anything but.

Contributing to the revival of Northeast Alberta Street, the gallery is just 8 months old but already in the black. As for the artwork on display, it's wildly colorful and lives up to the motto: Anything but ordinary.

Partners in life and business, Jane McLain and Carrie Wright decided to get the new century off to a blazing start last January with a new year's resolution to open their own gallery. Both artists and survivors of the corporate world, they had long dreamed of doing just that.

Together for more than seven years, they met in Colorado, then moved to Tucson, Ariz., before arriving in Portland five years ago. Always adventurous, they lived for a time in a tent. "We built furniture, then took it into town to sell for a meal," McLain recalls with a chuckle.

So without the benefit of a business plan or venture capital, they lucked out and found a space within shouting distance of their Portland home and set to work.

"We built the fixtures from scrap wood and our dream from the ground up," Wright explains. "All of our artists volunteered and pitched in—we couldn't have done it without them."

And in just one month these ambitious gals and pals transformed the space into a bright, cheerful storefront. Currently, they feature the work of 20 artists, most of them from the Portland area. But this is no stuffy, pretentious space where you might feel the need to whisper (or gasp when examining the prices).

"We want to have something for everyone," Wright says. "More important, we want our art to be accessible."

Plain Jane displays a mix of fine arts and crafts

and one-of-a-kind furniture pieces. You can find anything from metal sculpture to a hand-painted child's chair to ceramic tiles and vases to "shrine mirrors"—unique assemblages using recycled wood and architectural ornaments.

But the star of the place is not-so-plain Jane McLain, a talented, self-taught furniture maker. It all began some years back when she realized she needed some furniture for herself, but funds were tight. "I just went out and bought me a hammer," she remembers, describing her characteristic take-charge attitude, perhaps a result of being one of 13 children.

Today, McLain's pieces reflect a playful nature and joyful approach to color. She describes her work as "primitive, rustic, recycled with an artsy edge."

Indeed, she collects hand-painted tiles to incorporate into the fronts of cabinets and occasionally collaborates with Wright, who is also a painter. McLain is a scrounger who can turn almost any found object into something clever and beautiful. Various chairs in the gallery incorporate bottles and masks into their backs with a whimsical result, and each one is an original and never duplicated.

Clearly a hard worker, McLain gets up early to craft her furniture pieces before heading into the gallery five days a week; the other two days she's at it all day long. She works under a tarp outside her house, but she's not complaining.



Jane McLain (left) and Carrie Wright are having fun on Alberta Street

"I've always worked in the elements. We have a lot of fun," she insists. "We're laughing all the time." McLain says she and Wright work well together and continue to inspire each other.

However, McLain is still new enough at this that selling her creations is a thrill. "People are coming in and they're buying a piece of me, and they're going to take it home and live with it," she marvels, after writing up yet another custom order for a repeat customer.

So how about the ongoing discussion on Alberta Street about gentrification? McLain is quick to say she's not too political but does offer, "I don't want to see Starbucks or any corporate money on the street."

Then, she points out how well-diversified their end of the street is. "There are two Mexican family-owned and run restaurants, three African American businesses, one Asian-owned, nine women-owned businesses and several that are owned by lesbians. If this isn't diversity, what is?"

PLAIN JANE is located at 2936 N.E. Alberta St. Call 503-528-9691 or visit www.plainjanegallery.com.

ORIANA GREEN is a survivor of the art world and the Entertainment Editor of Just Out. She can be reached at oriana@justout.com.

Who was that masked woman?

Jenna MacGillis uses art to express repressed feelings

BY HERON

Jenna MacGillis is a passionate woman. You might not think so when you first see her. Pale eyes. Quiet demeanor. But just get her talking about her masks and watch the embers flame.

MacGillis makes masks, writes poems and dances. She and two other lesbian artists have collaborated on a show that runs through Nov. 29 at Plain Jane.

MacGillis' masks grew out of her desire to express deep emotions, which always had been a problem for her. Her grandmother, a schizophrenic, had insisted that emotions were dangerous and imposed a strict, almost Puritan ethic on her and her mother "in order to keep us safe." She says they still are recovering from the trauma.

About five years ago, MacGillis was taking authentic movement classes in San Francisco to help her express feelings too long repressed. "You listen to your body's inner impulse and let your body do what it wants to do," she explains. "You are, in effect, dancing for yourself, not for anyone's viewing."

One day while dancing she saw "with such clear focus, I wanted to create a mask." She began sculpting in clay. "I could directly create those faces that would come to me in a dance."

These days, the 32-year-old wears the masks while she dances. "My dancing embodies the

mask to portray ideas and feelings that are often denied or repressed."

MacGillis says she came out at the same time she discovered she was an artist. Isn't it funny how that happens?

She now has a master's degree in art and leadership and has performed in the Bay area, where she lived for 12 years before moving to Colorado. She moved to Portland this past June "for the culture and a strong gay community."

Gallery owners Jane McLain and Carrie Wright are proud as parents to have discovered MacGillis and to give her a start in the local art community. They arranged for Joya Menashe and Linda Peters to collaborate by taking photographs of the artist dancing with the papier-mâché masks, hand-tinting them and framing each one in a unique way to enhance the final effect. Fragments of MacGillis' poetry accompany them on the walls.

The masks are bright faces, intensely colored and alive with expression; each has a name and personality. Some are larger than life with rivers of bright hair flowing from them.

HERON is a Portland free-lance writer.



PHOTO BY HERON



PHOTO BY JOYA MENASHE

The many faces of Jenna MacGillis