

ART AT THE WATERSHED

Gallery owner Amy Isler Gibson sounds off on the visual arts in the 21st century

After a long career in psychotherapy and philosophy, Amy Isler Gibson switched gears in April 2012 and opened The Gallery at the Watershed, which features some of the most important contemporary art in Lane County. Gibson's artist roster is full of seasoned pros like Bill Brewer, Abbas Darabi, Wesley Hurd and sculptor Randy Ortiz. Now, she and a board of directors have started a nonprofit foundation to educate the community about engaging with the arts with classes such as "Composition Through the Eyes of an Artist" and "The Powers of Visual Art."

EW caught up with Gibson to discuss the role of galleries and her goals for the visual arts in Eugene.

Eugene has not been an easy place for art galleries to survive — several have opened and closed, and the economic downturn hit the arts especially hard. What is the role of an art gallery in the 21st century?

We would like to see galleries become teaching spaces. What I want my gallery to be is a place where people can come and learn about art. Not just look at it, but *learn* about it. I want it to be lively. I don't want it just to be this static place with art on the walls where it feels uncomfortable for people to walk in. We work really hard to have both high-end great art, elegant art on the walls, and yet be really warm and friendly.

In the distracting, screen-filled world we live in today, what do 2D and 3D art have to offer society?

You can learn things from a piece of art. A piece of art can make you think. It can give you all kinds of feelings; it might make you feel happy or peaceful, it might be disturbing — I don't think disturbing is necessarily a bad word in art. In a world in which community is more difficult, life is more frantic, church and spirituality and temple — all of that is just not a regular part of life for people — art, to me, really accesses the spirit. It comes from really deep inside good artists.

What are the triumphs of running a gallery?

We have not had a single show that I haven't been really proud of. I have to thank my curator [Robert Canaga] and my artists who trust me for that. Artists are trusting me with their livelihood. It's a big deal, both to have the trust of an artist and a really good curator and my own self-trust to do all that. The second thing is that we have built a community around this gallery that is really gorgeous to me.

And the challenges?

The really big challenge — I just have to be upfront about this and it really shouldn't surprise people — is financially it's really hard to keep a gallery going in this city. It's really hard to pay the bills. My own belief is that a gallery in these times, at least in a city this size, is not going to exist on sales alone. That's one of the reasons that we built out the nonprofit [Watershed Arts Foundation] so people have a way to donate. It's not the primary reason but it's one of them.

What is the Watershed Arts Foundation?

It's a nonprofit that grew out of the gallery, in part because we were seeing that people come into the gallery with a huge range of questions about art. Our board, which I think is a group of



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unusual people, is incredibly passionate about art. We really wanted to share that passion in a way that you can't do just in a commercial gallery. We wanted to be able to teach. We have access to incredible people, from UO and LCC faculty who are teaching for us, to great artists in the city who are teaching for us. I think when you learn more about art you just get bigger as a person.

In a commercial gallery, you are still limited by what will sell and so in an area like Eugene, where people aren't huge buyers, sometimes you have to be kind of cautious about what you put on the wall. And there's really nothing wrong with that except sometimes I want to be more provocative in what we put on the walls. That is one of the reasons that we ended up wanting to build out a nonprofit, so that we could do shows that were funded in other ways besides sales, so that we can put up art that's a bit riskier, edgier.

What are your goals with the foundation?

The overarching goal is that we really want to raise a dialogue about visual arts in the community that is compelling, educating. We have some great educators and artists who can share what they know in an informal, comfortable setting where people are not afraid to talk and bring their own experience, whether they're beginners or experts.

It's this dialogue we want Eugene to have that we're not really having outside of the university. The university is great but it's just not accessible to everyone. ... We have a whole generation now of people who grew up without the arts and now they're going into business and starting to run our cities and they don't have that in their background, but what they show us all the time is that they're interested; they care. ■

For more information and a class schedule, visit watershedartsfoundation.org. Q&A edited for length and clarity. To read the extended interview, visit eugeneweekly.com.

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