

# GALLERY INTERRUPTED

CATCHING UP WITH ARTIST AND CURATOR **AUNIA KAHN** ON THE CONTEMPORARY PLIGHT OF THE ART GALLERY *By Meerah Powell*

**E**ugene has an artistic reputation. At least, that's what Aunia Kahn found when she was researching where to relocate her St. Louis gallery. Kahn had always wanted to live on the West Coast, she says, and after months of research she decided Eugene would be the rightful home of the Alexi Era Gallery.

"After being in the Midwest for an extended period of time, I felt that there was no way to expand myself without being in a little bit more of a progressive area," Kahn says. "Eugene was an area that wasn't overpopulated, it wasn't oversaturated and it's up-and-coming, and it seemed very loving and accepting. That's why I chose Eugene."

Kahn started a Kickstarter campaign and — after raising more than \$24,000 from artists, art collectors, friends and family — the gallery made the move to Eugene in May.

Alexi Era Gallery, which mostly features pop surrealist art, opened at 245 W. 8th Avenue, just a few doors down from WOW Hall.

This September, Kahn had to close the gallery's brick-and-mortar location, but Kahn says the gallery is not closed, per se, as she will continue to curate art online and host pop-up shows around town.

The gallery is facing the same questions confronting galleries around the nation, says Kahn: "How can we stay alive when people come to our space, they want to see the art, they want to see the paint strokes, they want to have the experience, but they're not buying?"

Countless galleries, from Seattle's beloved Roq La Rue, one of the nation's foremost pop surrealism galleries run by a friend of Kahn's, to The New Zone Gallery and Jacob's Gallery here in Eugene, have closed their doors recently.

Though it might seem tempting to give up the dream of keeping Alexi Era open in the face of such obstacles, Kahn says she is passionate about the power of art, as she is not only a gallery-owner but an artist herself.

Born and raised in Detroit, Kahn moved to St. Louis in 2001, around the time a series of truly unfortunate events began to unravel.

"My mom got cancer and, within a very short period of time, my health started to decline," Kahn says. "I was bedridden and needed a caregiver for the next 11-and-a-half years."

Kahn doesn't like to discuss the details of her illness, though she does say she's mostly recovered now. During her time of bed rest, Kahn began creating art through photography and eventually digital painting. "I didn't really have an outlet and so I started to do creative stuff to occupy my mind and express the pain that I was going through."

Kahn also used this time to explore the ever-growing art world of the internet. She built her career by showcasing art online and connecting with other artists, gallery owners and collectors. Although helpful to artists, that same digital tool has also become an obstacle to galleries across the globe.

"The internet, as much as it's a great connection, is changing the artist, gallery and collective relationship," Kahn says. Galleries used to be the first point of contact for artist and collector, but the internet has made it so artists sell work directly to buyers without having to cut galleries any money for exhibiting and selling their pieces.

"It's changed so dramatically that we have almost become [competitors] with the people we're showing," Kahn says of the gallery. "I'm looking at this thinking, 'I don't want to go into debt and I always want to pay my artists. How can I do this without struggling?'"

The struggle with gallery spaces parallels other community businesses competing in the digital age, like record stores, bookstores and mom-and-pop boutiques.



AUNIA KAHN AT THE FORMER ALEXI ERA GALLERY SPACE ON 8TH AVENUE

PHOTO: TRASK BEDORTHA

A strategy some galleries have adopted is running dual businesses: galleries that are also coffee shops or retail stores, for example. Kahn says this is never something she's wanted to do; with so many mid-level galleries closing around the U.S., she says it's especially important to hold onto these full gallery spaces.

"If you look at art-walk night here, there's not a lot of full galleries," Kahn says. "There are places willing to showcase art, which is fantastic, but how many just galleries do we have here? Not many."

Though it may seem as though the light is growing dim on the future of the art gallery as we know it, Kahn says there's still hope. "The only way that it's going to change is if the community stands up and works together and is willing to invest in their local mom-and-pop business," she says.

As a consumer, Kahn says she realizes it's not financially feasible for a lot of people to buy locally instead

of online or from other big retailers that can afford to sell art for cheap; she does stress, however, that there are other ways to support community businesses rather than pulling out your pocketbook.

Although the digital age has made it tougher for galleries to sustain themselves, Kahn says, the internet can provide support.

"We have the internet. Check in. Write a Yelp review. Write a Facebook review. Go and take a picture of the space. Say you were there. Talk about how good it was," she says.

For Kahn, even though the fight for art galleries may seem impossible, it's still worth fighting.

"Art kept me alive," she says.

To follow Alexi Era Gallery, visit [alexieragallery.com](http://alexieragallery.com) or find it on Facebook. To follow the art of Aunia Kahn, visit [auniakahn.com](http://auniakahn.com) or find her artist page on Facebook.