

Are We Really an Art Town?

A NEWCOMER TO EUGENE POSES THE QUESTION TO ARTS LEADERS AROUND THE COMMUNITY BY ESTER BARKAI

I never had the opportunity to see the Jacobs Gallery, as it shut down the month I moved to Eugene. But as an art reviewer for *Eugene Weekly* in the past year, I've been shadowed by its presence — or rather, its lack of presence.

The way people speak of it is comparable to how people talk about a relative who went bad: concerned and embarrassed, even guilty. The feeling is that its closing reflects badly on who we are as an art town.

If we truly appreciated art, particularly visual art, would we have allowed the Jacobs Gallery to close?

Theresa Sizemore, general manager of the Hult Center, says we shouldn't let the closing of the Jacobs Gallery define who we are. The decision to close the gallery, which was located on the ground floor of the Hult Center, was not made by Eugene, she points out; it was made by a handful of people on the board.

Sizemore came to work on a Monday fully expecting the gallery's contract to be renewed for three years and instead was told by the board they would be shutting down operations altogether.

She guesses there were many reasons that led the board to its decision, not the least of which was fatigue. Even though the space was rent-free, it was difficult to keep it going. Operations weren't ideal.

The gallery was busiest during Hult events, but it didn't get foot traffic during the day like White Lotus Gallery or Karin Clarke Gallery do, the two main downtown for-profit galleries across the street from the Hult.

Though the gallery has been closed for nearly two years, it has remained a physical presence with its large "Jacobs Gallery" sign still on display. It's hard to move on with the space and sign still present. Like sharing a space with an ex after a break-up, the gallery has lingered to remind us of what we once had.

Meanwhile, the University of Oregon's art department will be reaching out to the community. The art department is scheduled to relocate its art faculty studios and a gallery space to the old Willamette Stationers building at 501 Oak Street, a short walk from the Hult Center.

Laura Vandenburg, an art professor at the UO, says construction is scheduled to begin in March. The gallery space will focus on art as inquiry, and should vitalize Eugene's contemporary art scene.

Courtney Stubbart, founder of Eugene Contemporary Art, an organization that provides exhibition opportunities for contemporary art, believes the contribution of the UO's downtown space will depend on how accessible it is to the community at large.

Stubbart, a graphic designer — he designed Eugene's 20x21 mural project logo — has seen friends graduate from the UO art program, stay in town a year and then leave.

Why? Because they trained in artistic fields not exhibited in Eugene, such as conceptual, installation or other exploratory genres.

Stubbart plans to stay in Eugene with his family, and says he would like to see contemporary art take hold here. To that end, he facilitates exhibits for contemporary artists.



PAINTER ADAM GROSOWSKY AND GALLERIST KARIN CLARKE

Last year he organized four shows in a space at the old Barn Light East (now Slightly Coffee Roasters), and this year he has nine shows planned for the same venue.

Maude Kerns Art Center doesn't have any particular type of art it's trying to put out into the world. The center is membership-based, with members ranging from first-grade age to retirement. "We have people here who have wanted to try watercolors all their lives," says exhibits coordinator Michael Fisher. "They can do that here."

When I met with Fisher, art made by 132 artists covered the walls, all by members.

The Membership Show is an annual non-juried exhibit in which every member of the center is qualified to display two artworks — no value judgments made.

Do people buy art here? They do sometimes, says Fisher, but the center doesn't rely on art sales to survive; its nonprofit status gives it access to other sources of funding.

Karin Clarke has been running her for-profit gallery — in other words, her business — for 15 years. When Clarke started **Karin Clarke Gallery** she wasn't sure she would last more than a year and would have taken a lease out on her space, if she could have, for only three months.

Both of Clarke's parents are artists — their work is currently on exhibit at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art — and she is no stranger to the risky business of art. Her father, the late Mark Clarke, left his job (coincidentally, at the Schnitzer Museum) when his artwork began to sell well enough to live off. Then the Portland gallery that was representing him went under and he was left without an income.

An art gallery is as risky a proposition as a restaurant or any other business, Clarke says.

She is, excuse the phrase, a "people person." Clarke does post prices on her gallery's website but prefers that people come in and engage. Her gallery focuses on making personal connections among herself, artist and buyer.

Of course the product, the artwork, is essential, but it also serves as a catalyst for relationships. When Clarke started the gallery, she began by showing artists in her parents' circle.

Then she had a group show that included works by local painter Adam Grosowsky, whom she studied art with at Lane Community College. All his paintings sold, so she asked him if he'd be interested in having a solo show. By then Grosowsky was already selling in larger urban areas and had serious doubts as to whether art would sell in Eugene.

The show was an enormous success, Grosowsky says. "There were a lot of dots" (red dots next to an artwork in a gallery indicate a sale).

Grosowsky's first show at Clarke's gallery "broke the barrier," he says. It legitimized the art scene in Eugene. If you ask him whether people in Eugene buy art, the answer is a resounding "Yes!"

When I met with him for an interview, we sat by the window at Perugino, the café across from the Karin Clarke Gallery. During the hour we were there, Grosowsky saw two people he knew, both collectors, pass or go into the gallery where his work was on display.

Next door to Perugino, **White Lotus Gallery** has been a fixture in Eugene since 1992. Its co-founder Hue-Ping Lin started by showing Asian art and now showcases regional artists as well.

Lin says there is an informal code that prevents an artist from being represented by more than one gallery in Eugene, but she still thinks there is room for more galleries.

It's a Catch-22, she says: More galleries would be good, but people are afraid to open them because of Eugene's less-than-stellar reputation as a good place for art.

Lin is aware — as are Clarke, Vandenburg and most people I spoke to — that artists can't survive by selling art just in Eugene. She doesn't think it would be fair to restrict artists to her gallery, and she encourages them also to seek representation in larger urban areas such as Portland, Seattle or San Francisco.

Eugene's art community, as elsewhere in the country, is divided into for-profit and nonprofit. Everyone agrees that we would benefit from having more art venues, of any type. But these two halves of the community hold different ideas on what support for the arts looks like.

In the for-profit world, "support" means sales: people buying art, taking it home and putting it on their walls. Nonprofit agencies often have access to funding before art is even made, on the basis of a proposal.

And some on the nonprofit side find equating "art" with "business" distasteful.

John Barry is managing director of the Arts and Business Alliance of Eugene. He points to a relatively recent Arts & Economic Prosperity 5 study, conducted by Americans for the Arts, as proof that Eugene is already a great city as far as art is concerned.

According to the national study, "Arts in Eugene contribute twice as much to the local economy as the median of other similarly-sized cities. In 2015, that economic impact in Eugene equaled 62 million dollars and 2,400 jobs."

The study focuses on how well nonprofit arts impact the local economy, and in this case shows that art is good for Eugene.

The question, however, remains: Is Eugene good for art? ■