

ART HUB

THE DYNAMIC NONPROFIT ASTORIA VISUAL ARTS HAS A GROWING LIST OF PROJECTS TO ENHANCE THE ARTS IN ASTORIA

Story by DWIGHT CASWELL

Astoria is undergoing a renaissance, with a new cultural and economic vitality that is attracting people to Astoria as both visitors and residents. At the heart of this revival is the arts, and the organization that is doing the most to raise awareness of the arts is Astoria Visual Arts.

AVA was founded in 1989, a nonprofit intended to “enhance, strengthen and promote the arts in greater Astoria area.” Since then it has had its ups and downs, and for six years focused on fiber arts, with a group working under AVA’s nonprofit umbrella. The Astoria Fiber Arts Studio is now its own nonprofit, and a new activist AVA Board of Directors has turned the organization into the most dynamic and creative arts group in the area.

AVA now has a growing list of projects, from the Miss Bea Johnson Fund for Young Artists (founded by local artists Noel and Pat Thomas), which seeks to promote fine arts among young people, to a partnership with Recology Western Oregon, the folks who

collect your trash and recycling, which will support the creation of art from recycled and discarded materials.

Perhaps the most visible AVA undertaking is the successful artist-in-residence program (AVA a-i-r), which provides free studio space to emerging artists, with plans to do the same for writers. Participants open their studios to the public during Astoria’s monthly Second Saturday Art Walk.

“A-i-r is about finding emerging artists and giving them confidence and motivation,” says painter and AVA board member Darren Orange, who serves on the AVA a-i-r selection committee.

This has certainly worked with one of the current artists-in-residence, Annie Eskelin. She had painted in group studios at college and an art collective, but never had a studio of her own, until the AVA a-i-r program.

“It’s been unbelievable. I’m taking myself more seriously, creating a body of work, and thinking of myself as a professional,” she says about the a-i-r program. “And my studio is right next to Darren Or-

ange and Robert Paulmenn, who actually do it.”

Eskelin is interested in getting into a local gallery and is impressed by the “tough competition” in Astoria. She says of her work, “I paint intuitively. I start painting and see what happens. I discover things about myself.”

Blaine Verley is another local artist who has benefited from the a-i-r program. Verley shows his work at Luminari Arts and WineKraft Wine Bar, and he’s been painting for over 40 years. “A long time, man,” he says. “I always knew it was what I wanted to do, but things got in the way.”

Now his art is getting a boost. “I saw the words ‘free studio.’ I’ve never had a studio of my own, and I thought it would be fun.” His a-i-r space is above the Edison Bros Fish Co., on the 11th Street Pier and, says Verley, “I love the water, man.”

None of the artists-in-residence have come from any great distance, although applications have come from as far away as Estonia. AVA would like to extend the program to distant artists, but funding for housing continues to be a challenge.

The latest major AVA project is the Coastal Oregon Artist Residency, the partnership with Recology Western Oregon. In a few weeks, AVA will issue a call for artists to apply for the residency, which will take place over the summer. Artists will receive a modest stipend and 400 square feet of space at Recology Western Oregon’s Warrenton office near the Astoria Regional Airport in which to assemble their art.

Orange observes that Recology became involved in the project, “to support and promote the local arts community, and educate the public about resource conservation, recycling, reuse and repurposing materials otherwise destined for landfill disposal.”

The project with Recology Western Oregon illustrates how AVA likes to partner and collaborate with other people and groups. “We facilitate projects that other people would like to do,” says AVA board member Ray Merritt. “There’s not much money, but we can use our history in the community and our nonprofit status.”

Another of these projects is a partnership with the Clatsop County Heritage Museum: an exhibition of

an Astoria artist’s work that spans 60 years. Arvi Ostrom owned the Snug Harbor Beer Parlor in Uniontown from 1934 to 1970, and when he wasn’t serving beer he must have spent every minute painting because he produced more than 10,000 works. His art often had a nautical theme and featured the people, boats and buildings of Astoria. Currently being catalogued and conserved in Seattle, the plan is to bring some of the art back to Astoria.

“It’s folk art,” Orange says, “illustrative, impressionistic and well-crafted nuggets of Astoria history.” AVA is also in the midst of other undertakings. The organization is doing its best to resurrect the Luna Phaser, a large sculpture by Jim Fink that would track the relationship of the tide and the moon. First proposed over a decade ago, the Luna Phaser is envisioned as the first of many public artworks exhibited along the Astoria Riverwalk.

AVA is also partnering with the Obon Society in a Japanese-American project that seeks to heal families through exhibiting and returning personal artifacts taken as battlefield souvenirs during World War II.



During her AVA a-i-r residency, which started Jan. 1 and runs to March 30, Annie Eskelin has created a body of paintings and started thinking of herself as a professional artist.

Photo by Dwight Caswell



Photo by Dwight Caswell

Astoria Visual Arts’ board of directors includes Astoria artist Darren Orange, left, and Ray Merritt, who has served several terms as president of the board.



Photo by Joshua Bessex

Blaine Verley stands by one of his paintings in his Astoria waterfront studio space.



Submitted photo

Luna Phaser, an AVA public art installation project, is a kinetic tidal-activated sculpture by artist Jim Fink. The project is in post-planning, pre-implementation phase.