

REALISM MEETS THE ABSURD

Distinguished artist
Jill McVarish opens
her own Astoria gallery

By WILLIAM HAM
FOR COAST WEEKEND

To the casual passerby, the space at 160 10th Street in Astoria may not look much different than it has for some time: Paintings can be seen through the large storefront windows against the stark white walls inside, and the hand-painted sign identifying it as the Astoria Fine Art Gallery still hangs above the door as it has for years.

But big changes have been visited on this modest space in recent days.

For years, it served as a showroom for some of the thousands of pieces of original art owned by beloved Astorian teacher and community booster Michael Foster. After his passing in 2016, locals Zelda English and Barry Brown took over and rechristened the space the Wake Gallery.

And now, after only two months open to the public under that name, it's changed hands again.

As of March, it is

officially the McVarish Gallery, under the proprietorship of Astoria-based painter Jill McVarish.

McVarish has had her eye on the space for some time, quite literally. For inspiration, she takes a regular morning walk along the waterfront with her dog, Chauncey, and the gallery on 10th was a daily stop along her route.

"Michael Foster always had the most amazing art hanging here, just an incredible collection," she said.

"But I don't think it was open to the public, so I never went in. It always seemed to be a place to enjoy the art from a bit of a distance."

This changed with the assumption of the lease by English and Brown.

"They really turned it into a nice space — pulled the carpet up, opened things up a lot," McVarish said. "Then after only two months, I saw it was for rent again, so I just called them out of curiosity. It turned out to be pretty affordable and, well, I didn't know what else to say, so I said I was going to do it!"

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COLIN MURPHEY PHOTOS

LEFT: A close-up reveals the level of detail in a painting by Jill McVarish.
BELOW: Jill McVarish in her Astoria gallery.

Jill McVarish



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