

A woman's place is in the art gallery



'Self-Portrait' by Sara Carlson, at New Women's Art Gallery.

SPOTLIGHT **COVER STORY**

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IT'S ALL Gloria Steinem's fault. Last February when the author and feminist spoke at Bookshop Santa Cruz she gave the women in the audience an assignment: Do something outrageous.

"We were all standing in line waiting for our books to be signed and talking about how it would be neat to start a women's art gallery in town," said local artist Mary Dudley, who was in attendance. Taking part in the informal conversation was Barbara Martin who said she had a friend, Neidin Henard, who had rented space on Front Street in Santa Cruz and might be interested in the idea.

The group enthusiastically agreed that this was the kind of "outrageous" project Steinem was advocating and pressed to meet with Henard.

It was a perfect case of kismet for Henard. She and her husband, Santa Cruz Defense Attorney investigator Joe Henard, had rented the location to serve as a showroom for tiles Neidin designs and produces. But when a lawsuit involving the pair's Santa Cruz wharf business, Neidin's On The Wharf, consumed the money earmarked for the showroom, Neidin didn't have the resources or the time to devote to converting the location to a showroom.

So she met with Mary Dudley, Barbara Martin and friends.

"We met for 45 minutes and I said 'Let's go for it,'" Henard said. Then she came up with the "great idea that just about put us all in the hospital."

The new McPherson Center for Art and History was slated to open in two days. Henard proposed they "piggyback the opening of the New Women's Art Gallery onto the opening of the museum."

"It just happened to be the right group of people," to pull it off said Mary Dudley.

In a motivated frenzy the group painted and cleaned the former warehouse that was replete with spiders, cracked plaster, peeling paint and "dust like you wouldn't believe." Invitations were printed. Dudley passed out fliers at the McPherson opening.

"We did it in 48 hours," said Henard. "We worked around the clock."

An anticipated crowd of 100 surged to 300 at the small gallery's opening reception. Henard, still in her sweat pants for the occasion, said "it was unbelievable." The group, exhausted but elated, considered their work a success.

But this isn't a Cinderella story. There are no chisel-jawed, Dudley Do-Rights rescuing passive maidens. Instead, strong-willed women were getting together to try to bring their vision to fruition.

Some of those strong wills clashed. Following the success of the opening, three of the original five founding members decided to bow out of the gallery. Dudley, one of the original five who left, said the group was frustrated with Henard's tight grip on the gallery's control panel. "We weren't able to make any decisions on the original vision we had," said Dudley.

According to Henard, the original group decided the gallery was too much work; Henard wanted more money and commitment than they thought was reasonable.

But Henard felt too many people had shown an interest in the gallery to abandon it. So she stayed on and continues to prop up the slowly accelerating gallery with the help of approximately 50 associate members, many of whom contribute hours of volunteer time.

"The momentum has been really good," said Sara Carlson, an associate member and artist who's been involved with the gallery since its beginning. "The overall vision is to have this physical space for women artists to be able to show their work and not have to compete with the male-dominated art scene."

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Kathleen Bartlett Abood, a successful artist whose work is part of the current show at the gallery, considers herself an organized person. One of the first associate members, Abood said she's been a little dismayed at the lack of structure in the new venture.

"At this point, because it's so new and formative, there's a lot of heightened concern about how we evolve," said Abood, who said she came to the realization last week that she was putting in too much of her outside time into gallery-related efforts.

"I wanted accountability. I wanted everything to be organized because then it would be bliss," she said.

But while Abood struggles with the ambiguous development of the gallery's structure, she's excited that gallery members are moving forward together effectively "within relationship" to one another.

"It might not be done on the timeline we'd like or decided in the process that we've become familiar with," said Abood, "but we move from contention to resolution and we keep learning from that."

The gallery began with 12 associate members that met on a weekly basis and all contributed something to the gallery's growth. Meetings have recently become monthly. The only requirement to become an associate member is an annual \$25 fee that's set to go up in August.

Associate members are guaranteed they'll have at least one piece in a show, Henard said. Members who are interested can also volunteer for various committees according to their interests. Steering, publicity, and reception are a few of the basic committees that currently drive the gallery.

A characteristic that provides incentive to becoming an associate member is that there's a strong educational bent to the gallery.



Printmaker Sara Carlson leads a recent workshop at the Women's Art Gallery, one of many the gallery is offering.

"To actually understand that this career is a profession and how you go forward from bookkeeping to taxes is one of our main focuses," said Henard. "The art is 20 percent. The business and marketing is 80 percent."

Henard doesn't apologize when she acknowledges the business end of an artist's career.

"We're not ashamed of using the word 'sell,'" said Henard. "With the cost of living in Santa Cruz and the way the economy is, you can't be ashamed to say 'I want to sell my artwork'."

For Panda Kroll, an associate at the gallery whose monotype was

recently selected best of show at the Alumni Art Exhibition at UC Santa Cruz, the advent of the New Women's Art Gallery was timely.

"I'd been developing images," said Kroll. "but it was hard for me to give myself permission to do art."

As an associate member of the gallery, all that changed for Kroll. She framed 10 of her pieces for a show and is now exhibiting her work in juried shows in San Francisco and Berkeley.

"It feels very organic in terms of an evolution," Kroll said. "This was a very safe place for me to show my work and once I had my work framed it was just a question

of which wall to hang it on next."

Kroll also said that what makes the New Women's Art Gallery so unusual is the full spectrum of experienced and inexperienced artists involved in the process. And the workshops held at the gallery are also a boon said Kroll, who has spent many hours driving to Berkeley and San Francisco to attend workshops.

Henard said workshops offered through the gallery by professional artists concentrate on everything from resume building to silk painting to matting and framing. Workshops are also available for children in a variety of different mediums.

"There's not many physical spaces specified just for women artists," said Carlson who will attend Arizona State in the fall with a full scholarship toward receiving her master's degree in art.

But doesn't that leave the guys out?

Not at all, said Henard.

"We'd be perfectly happy and, in fact, excited to exhibit a man's work as long as he's willing to sign a woman's name to it. Women have had to sign men's names to their work for years in order to be accepted."

Steinem would probably have no trouble labeling that an outrageous act.