

artscope

100TH ISSUE

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DONNAMARIA BRUTON & GEORGIA O'KEEFFE: ART AS PUZZLE IN NEWPORT

GREETINGS FROM QUINCY + SOWA BOSTON & 450 HARRISON

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ON THE EDGE AT THE ARMENIAN MUSEUM

WALKER & MILLER AT OGUNQUIT | DALÍ AT SPRINGFIELD

SANDWICH GLASS MUSEUM | KINGSBURY III IN BRATTLEBORO

SOWA DISTRICT REBOUNDS

OPEN STUDIOS SHOWCASE 450 HARRISON ARTISTS



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BRITTNEY CICCONE
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Artists' studios evolved and changed over time but have always maintained a magnetism that sparks visitors' curiosity. How is SoWA, Boston's busiest Art + Design District, and how are artists dealing with the post-pandemic season? Can SoWA's Artists Open Studios serve as a continuing model for community revitalization through the arts? The art of revitalizing or the art revitalizing?

On my recent visit to Ireland, I was eager to see Francis Bacon's preserved studio, which has been at Dublin's Hugh Lane Gallery since 1998. It is a large project undertaken by a team of archeologists, conservators and curators who carefully recreated every detail, including the dust accumulated since the artist's death in 1992. The lines of visitors to see the studio through narrow transparent doors are huge. Throughout history, there has been a fascination with seeing the intimacy of artists' studios and their belongings. Will we see artists' studios at auction houses anytime soon?

Derived from the Italian word, *studiolo*, a space designed among other things for contemplation, artists' studios evolved and changed over time but never ceased to be an interesting visit for art pilgrims. In the Renaissance, artists developed profitable relationships with patrons who paid for their work and studios. Around the 19th century, when the slogan 'Art for Art's Sake' gained traction as a

revolutionary principle, artists realized that they no longer needed a patron to sponsor their studio practices. Concurrently, across Europe, the invention of the paint tube represented a revolutionary moment allowing artists to paint *plein air*, a studio without walls or rent. However, studio space was still vital. Although there is a consensus and data to back up the idea of revitalization and community building through the arts, this is only possible if the marriage between real estate developers



and artists becomes a happy union. Haven't artists' areas always been known for the action and as a place where the intellectual excitement and magic happen?

Located in Boston's South End, the 450 Harrison Ave. Artist Studios building, according to some artists, is the place to be. Neglected for decades, the mill and warehouse district was rebranded by GTI Properties in the early 2000s, shedding a bright light at the end of the artists' tunnels. Today known as SoWA – South of Washington, Art + Design District – it has become Boston's largest art destination. The more famous and larger building, at 450 Harrison Ave., comprises three floors of studios and nearly 100 spaces ranging in size from 400 to 1,400 square feet. A few blocks north at the edge of SoWA, at 46 Waltham Street, is the second building, with studios ranging from 400 to 1,200 square feet.

For visual artist Nick Peterson-Davis, who has been a tenant at the 450 Harrison Ave. artist studios for three years, the pandemic was an opportunity to create and work on new experiments. After retiring from being an HIV/AIDS nurse/educator, Davis embraced his artistic skills and became a full-time artist. His oil on canvas work excels good vibes and an abundance of feelings that instantly and viscerally navigates from the viewer's eyes to the brain, conveying plenitude and pleasure.

Using bright and bold colors, Peterson-Davis covers every corner of the canvas with thick layers of paint and visible brushstrokes. His studio has plenty of natural light, and cozy couches, making it extremely inviting. Buyers can easily select from the artworks exposed on plenty of wall space. After the pandemic, his business has been prospering. Art collectors and aficionados are starting to return to the area as well as people who have second homes or are redecorating their places.

Peterson-Davis, who comes to work in his studio daily, thrives on having visitors, especially those who could become potential buyers. After years with a studio in Allston and at his home, he longed for a place with more action, which offered Open Studios and other events. Beating a waiting list, he conquered his studio at 450 Harrison and now is extremely grateful for having this space surrounded by great restaurants, artists and galleries. "The combination makes a perfect destination to promote the arts and artists," he said. "To be able to be in a place like this in Boston is awesome. The landlord takes care of the building, organizes a big market and has renovated the SoWA Power Station at 50 Harrison Ave., which hosts several large-scale shows and private events. The place has been in the making for years, but it feels hot right now. It feels like a destination, and it's fun to be a part of that."

He's talking about GTI properties, whose founder, Mario Nicosia, has been an energetic and effective developer of residential and commercial real estate in Boston for nearly



50 years. Today, his portfolio includes one million square feet of office and retail property in the city's rapidly evolving SoWA District and over 400 residential rental apartments in the South End and St. Botolph neighborhoods. Nicosia has spent the last 15 years improving his Harrison Avenue and other South End neighborhood properties. He is considered, by some, the contemporary version of the Renaissance Medici family, huge patrons of the arts and artists. Artists and real estate developers have a long love and hate story.

The post-pandemic season also brought new businesses and new galleries to the area. Full-time fiber artist Agusta Ingebjorg Agustsson exhibits at SoWA's Galatea Fine Art, one of the few entirely run by artists. She believes that the new gallery space taken over by MassArt has contributed significantly to the area's vibrancy. The MassArt x SoWA gallery's aim is to display high-quality work in a broad variety of media from aspiring and well-known artists in the MassArt community. According to Agustsson, it is inspiring to see young artists sharing their ambitions and forward-thinking work. She added that in general, visitor's traffic varies depending on the days, significantly increasing during the Open Market on Sundays and First Friday events when galleries and artists welcome larger audiences to celebrate the arts and culture. Both events are run by GTI properties.

OPPOSITE PAGE LEFT: Nick Peterson-Davis in his 450 Harrison Ave. studio.

OPPOSITE PAGE RIGHT: Sign directory for SoWa Art + Design District.

ABOVE: Brittney Ciccone in her 450 Harrison Ave. studio.



ABOVE: Agusta Ingebjorg Agustsson.

On the third floor at studio #304, a group of five longtime friends – Virginia Hamilton, Pat Vinter, Mary Mandarino, Susan Alvey and Chris Cox, all weavers and fiber artists, share a large studio space. Before the pandemic, tired of running up and down to each other's studios looking for supplies to exchange, art critique sessions, or simply chatting about their work, they decided to apply for a bigger space that could accommodate the five of them. They succeeded. They ran an efficient operation, relocated large looms, various equipment and massive volumes of supplies. And then the pandemic hit.

During that time, safely entering the studio, the focus turned into nonstop making. The time served as a lab for discoveries and experimentation, challenging their skills and pushing the envelope with the unconditional support of each other and plenty of time for stimulating critical reflection about work styles. Their strong friendship and camaraderie is reflected in every corner of the studio, where the perfect combination of skills works on everyone's behalf, including visitors and buyers. When the pandemic loosened and the building finally opened, they realized how much new work they had created and how much they had accomplished.

The studio presents a great setup where a store and lots of great merchandise are freshly made, almost jumping off from the visible looms displayed by the large windows. Visitors are blasted with an explosion of colors, a parade of different styles of wearables and functional objects. The price range makes it very challenging to contain the urge to purchase and own something so unique that one would never find at any other place. Virginia Hamilton's handmade baskets are a feast for the eyes and hands since

touching is encouraged. "People have always been interested in our textile work. We have cotton, chenille, linen, silk, and once visitors are here, they can see how things are done and what it takes to do the work," said Hamilton.

Like Davis, Hamilton commends GTI Properties for their dedication, support and fast response to any issues in the building. According to Hamilton, tourism has increased, visitors are coming to it from cruises while on vacation, and are eager to renew their homes with new decor and accessories. Traffic has also seen a bump in buyers and visitors during Sunday's Open Market. Overall, Hamilton is pleased with visitors' behavior and is hopeful that business will continue to prosper. "Being here working and talking to people is very exciting. People love to know the maker, meet the person who does the work and talk to them. That is exciting and one of the things that I love about being here," Hamilton said.

Brittney Ciccone, a Boston-based artist specializing in abstract painting, waited two years to find a studio at 450 Harrison Ave. She applied at several buildings for a studio space and has been highly grateful for finding her current one. Ciccone's studio, in 309C, features a beautiful and sizable convex style mirror that, combined with the large glass doors, brings the unique transparency and invitation to see and look at her work. Visitors walking by without entering can't miss Ciccone working, stretching canvas or painting new pieces.

During the pandemic, she was very productive and is exceptionally pleased with her clients' behaviors, who have made significant purchases while looking to redecorate homes or fill up empty wall spaces. Her clients and new buyers either come to the studio or make purchases online. Ciccone's large pieces are at a higher price point during First Friday's events when most serious buyers come early, before the start of the gallery events at 6 p.m. "The month of June was great. I sold a lot of work. Sundays have been busy. I sell a large piece every

BELOW: Virginia Hamilton, Pat Vinter, Mary Mandarino and Susan Alvey (l to r), AKA The Weavers of Studio #304 at 450 Harrison Ave.



single Sunday. When I am not here, people take a picture and send me messages asking if the piece is still available and this is my best year yet," said Ciccone.

She has been able to connect with interior designers who buy her work and has work purchased by the InterContinental Boston hotel. As a good entrepreneur and business role model, Ciccone also travels to art fairs in New York, and Washington, D.C., representing herself. Sales have reflected well, and she has been highly successful. Ciccone is enthusiastic about the art market and sales possibilities and sees that the art sector and SoWA is gaining traction. Ciccone's work has been featured in numerous galleries and exhibits throughout New England and New York. Her work is collected by private clients all over the world.

It is difficult to imagine what returning to normal looks like and who will be able to continue to pursue a career as an artist and to keep granting us with beauty, creativity and reflections about the world around us. The partnership between GTI Properties and artists, combined with each other's trust and support, and having the artists sit at the same table with real estate developers, is an excellent recipe for success. Have you visited SoWA Arts + Design District lately? I think you will be blown away!

Claudia Fiks

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