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Business is blooming: Naples Art District is enticing enough artists, customers for a summer presence

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Naples News



By *Harriet Howard Heithaus* of the *Naples Daily News*

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Leigh Herndon with Japanese brushes for her rozome painting. She works in a small room and out in the gallery, as the plastic-covered floor attests. Harriet Howard Heithaus

industrial quarters.

Even today, the one-half square mile that constitutes the district is flanked by a pair of streets that seem to have half the Western world's supply of granite countertop on their lots. Dump trucks



Michaela Castaldi works on a watercolor in the Shirley Street Studio she shares with Leigh Herndon.



Richard Rosen is one of the founders of the Naples Art District. His studio, kiln and gallery have been in North Naples for more than 10 years.

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[Naples Art District](#)

rumble by, landlocked stevedores on their way to a cement mixer or dealer with stone on their bucketed backs.

Commercial showrooms beckon with upholstery, drapes, tile, woodwork or quirky outlier specialties: golf balls and convertible ragtops.

The Naples Art District may seem more like a state of mind than a specific location, with artists' studios and galleries spread out over four streets, some of them sandwiched in between plumbers, design houses and lighting contractors. Still, customers to those businesses must pass studios with banners, palm-arched front doors and art-filled windows to reach them.

"This street is the Rodeo Drive of the design business," declared Dede Sweet, whose Sweet Art Gallery on Trade Center Way was one of the original members of the Naples Art District. "You have all your lighting places, your granite places ... It is the best area for getting builders and homeowners who are making selections for their new homes or remodeling their homes."

Richard Rosen, whose ceramics studio predates the Naples Arts District, appreciates its industrial tenor for a second reason: He throws open the ample loading door of his space to cool the building when his kiln is firing raku.

Creativity in numbers

Marianne Megela, who looks like a work of art herself in a black-and-stripped top with asymmetrical pockets and lace-up boots, serves as the group's volunteer coordinator from her husband's business, The Artists' Gallery. She handles marketing and monthly group meetings in their Shirley Street quarters. And — as she did earlier as coordinator for Naples Artcrafters events and Naples Art Association's Art in the Park — she familiarizes herself with the best aspects of each artist's work.

"We have the largest concentration of working professional artists' studios in Southwest Florida," Megela declared, echoed by Rosen and Sweet. That

distinction covers an area from Tampa to Miami, Rosen adds.

Further, they feel their name is becoming known to the extent that artists are seeking out the district for their locations. About 18 months ago, Libbie Bramson brought her frameworthy, but wearable, beaded collars and necklaces to join the established large-format art studio of Tammra Sigler. Watercolor artist Michaela Castaldi moved in 45 days ago. Prize-winning nature photographer Dennis Goodman moves his photography and print studio there in June.

In the last five years, even through a recession, the number of working studios and art galleries more than doubled from 16 to 34 — more than triple the five galleries and studios here when the original alliance was forged for the 2006 season.

But there is no coasting. Naples Art District's artists uniformly want more awareness of their existence.

So for the first time, the association has extended its first Wednesday evening "Art Alive" events and third Saturday open houses through the summer. (There is an event 5-8 p.m. this Wednesday. See the side story for more.)

The Wednesday night events tend to blend a bit of party into the open house. Sweet brings music to her studio; artist Holly Nemmeck, whose art teases pop culture with silk-screen, paint and photography, fittingly offers a popcorn bar.

"In the last three years, we've really seen an influx of people in the summer," explained Megela, adding wryly, "I remember when my husband and I first moved down here in the late '80s. Come May first there were tumbleweeds blowing down the street."

"We feel that we've only just gotten the tip of the iceberg in visitors to the Naples area finding us. So we realize there's tremendous potential for growth," said Rosen.

Getting word out

Many of the artists here attend local art shows and pass out their business cards to bring customers in; they advertise their events as a group. Many of them teach classes, which bring people to the area — and helps finance their passion for their art. The ample studios of this area, built as showrooms and looming as large as 1,500 feet, offer that opportunity.

Just next door to the Megelas' gallery, Leigh Herndon presides over buckets of dye and stretcher racks where students' rozone-painted silk (a Japanese batik) dries. Both she and watercolor artist Michaela Castaldi teach, and both moved in here in the last 45 days.

"This is exactly where I wanted be," declared Castaldi, who had been shoehorned into an alleyfront studio shared with three other artists on First Street near the beach: "It was a cute little cottage, but it was small ... I couldn't have a gallery there where people could walk in."

In their street-facing studio, even with shady trees in front of it, traffic is much better. Herndon is delighted with the change, which offers generous wall space and good rack for her filmy, painted silk wraps and jackets.

"In this month and half I've sold twice as much as I have anywhere else," she marveled.

Sculptor Joel Shapses joined the local Interior Design Society, an organization of professionals who often hold the last word on what art, as well as draperies and carpet, go into a home. This year, he's its president.

Still, these artists are, in some ways, alone together.

"Each of us have an individual business basically, and that is up to that particular artist as to how they go out in the community and market their work. My husband and I choose to work through the art shows the various art leagues and centers that are here," she said. The Megelas also are members of five area art organizations. "We try to stay involved with the local art element."

"I have always said artists have taken on a career that is unbelievably difficult, because they are asking the public to love their creative style as much as they do," Megela said. She looks around her and her husband's

gallery, a showplace for Jack Megela's expansive landscape photography and an inventory of regional sculptures and broad-stroke, bold-color paintings.

"That's so difficult, because you may have to be in front of thousands of people before one or two people appreciate that passion."

If you go

'Art Alive'

When: 5-8 p.m. Wednesday, April 6

Where: Naples Art District bounded by Pine Ridge Road, Airport-Pulling Road, Shirley Street and Trade Center Way; obtain a map of all the studios and galleries, begin at Artisans Plaza, 5760 Shirley Street or Sweet Art Gallery 2054 Trade Center Way.

Admission: Free

Something else: Art Alive events are planned for these first Wednesdays through the summer — May 4, June 1 and July 6; and these third weekends — April 16-17, May 21-22, June 18-19 and July 16-17



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