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Travel

# Arts and artists in the Berkshires

By Necee Regis | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 20, 2013



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

**Melanie Mowinski stood near the fully automated Vandercook press, at PRESS in North Adams.**

“I want to introduce you to Darth Vader’s mother,” said Jarvis Rockwell, holding up a small plastic toy.

We were in his Main Street studio, standing next to an 11-foot-high stepped pyramid sculpture lined with thousands of action figurines, including personalities real and fictional, from the queen of England and Whoopi Goldberg

to Jesus, Shakespeare, Freud, E.T., and Gandolf from “The Lord of the Rings.”

Rockwell, 81, son of the famed illustrator Norman Rockwell, is one of dozens of artists working and exhibiting in reclaimed storefronts in this northern Berkshires town that is home to the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA), the largest center for contemporary visual and performing arts in the country.

In an effort to spur local development and promote local art, the program Downtown Street Art, now in its fifth year, was created by the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts’ (MCLA) Berkshire Cultural Resource Center.

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“The goal is to bring foot traffic to North Adams,” said Jonathan Secor, who teaches arts management at MCLA and is director of MCLA Gallery 51.

“Using art as a catalyst, the program turns empty storefronts into pop-up galleries. We’ve had close to 100,000 visitors in five years, and five new businesses were started,” he said.

The college’s gallery, purposefully situated off campus, hosts 10 shows a year, featuring work of artists from around the world as well as a once-a-year student exhibition, and student-curated and faculty shows.

One of Secor’s favorite projects occurs this month when the gallery is turned over to collage artist Daniel O’Connor who spearheads “100 Hours in the Woodshed,” a

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PHOTOS



**Photos: Art in North Adams**



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**A drawer full of letters at PRESS, a hybrid teaching and gallery space for**

five-day marathon of collage-making by dozens of artists. During gallery hours visitors are encouraged to interact with artists in the midst of the creative process.

**letterpress printing in North Adams.**

“There’s great energy. It’s great fun,” said Secor. “It’s all about collage in its broadest form: mixed media, sound, forms. Amazingly good work comes out of it.”

At the end of the 100-hour art-making extravaganza, curators from Mass MoCA choose work for a show that opens the following Tuesday. (Artist Kickoff: Jan. 24, 5-7 p.m. Reception: Jan. 29, 5-7 p.m.)

The North Adams Artists’ Co-Operative Gallery (NAACO Gallery) is an independent member-run organization. Co-directors Nestor Valdes and Colleen Williams curate exhibitions and sell the work of 40 artists in the sprawling space on the corner of Main and Marshall streets.

Open since 2009, the gallery features fine crafts and fine art in equal proportion. Two-person member shows usually dominate the front of the gallery. Wend your way through a hallway to another enormous room where the exhibitions change every two months.

“We do what we can to promote regional artists,” said Valdes. “Over the years we’ve developed relationships with clients. We get many return customers. We’re growing as a gallery.”

Also on Main Street, PRESS is a hybrid teaching and gallery space for letterpress printing sponsored by MCLA. Melanie Mowinski, who teaches design, book arts, and printmaking at the college, helped open the space last year.

“The cool thing about this space is that we’re active,” said Mowinski. “When we’re open, someone is usually printing. Our mission is education.”

Visitors can observe artists working on a fully automated circa 1969 Vandercook press, a machine Mowinski calls “the Cadillac of print.”

“I want to share the magic of print and letterpress, and create a place that is welcoming,” she said.

Around the corner on Eagle Street, artists Thor Wickstrom and Jaye Fox, partners in business and life, opened studio21south, a fine art gallery. Wickstrom describes their work as “realists in the Art Students League [of New York] tradition.”

The gallery started in a loft at the nearby Historic Beaver Mill and now hosts exhibits in this storefront, featuring about 10 realist and abstract artists, half from the Berkshires and half from outside the region.

“Mass MoCA is avant garde. We’re more traditional. You don’t have to choose a camp anymore,” said Wickstrom, adding, “If for any reason the doors are locked, we’re close by — give a call.”

Martha Flood Design, also on Eagle Street, is a combined studio and fabric gallery that serves both individual clients and the interior design trade.

An artist and designer of fabrics, wall coverings, and laminate industries, Flood’s Woodlands Design Collection is inspired by natural patterns and textures in the New England landscape, such as autumn leaves, dandelions, Queen Anne’s lace, Birch trees, grass, and more.

“I started with five patterns and have been adding more,” said Flood.

Flood takes photographs of textures and manipulates them in the computer to “build an image” of patterns that are digitally printed in a factory on canvas made from recycled plastic bottles. In addition to rolls of patterned fabric, Flood sells hand-sewn tote bags, pillows, and other home accessories.

“People come in here and get all happy. It’s like therapy in some way,” she said.

When ceramicists Gail and Phil Sellers moved from Ohio, they opened River Hill Pottery in the Eclipse Mill, a former textile mill that was redesigned into living and working spaces for artists in 2005.

Specializing in hand-woven clay baskets created for use in the kitchen, the Sellerses — married and working together for 42 years — make close to 2,000 baskets a year.

“We live here, we work here, and we sell here. We’re open most days, seven days a week,” said Gail Sellers. “We have people come in here from all over the world. It amazes me.”

Visitors can tour the studio and see the couple at work: extruding clay coils, weaving strips over foam molds, making glazes, and firing baskets in electric kilns.

“The community here, it percolates, so much is going on all the time,” Sellers said.

Jane Hudson, digital and video artist, photographer, and musician, presides over Hudson’s, a shop adjacent to Mass MoCA featuring a salon-type display of local artist works as well as antiques, collectibles, jewelry, and more. Look for artist Michael McKay’s “OK Used Cars,” a series of shaped automobile paintings hand-cut with a jigsaw (“a funny, wonderful sensibility,” said Hudson), the “outsider art” paintings of Karl Mullen, and the elegant folded-screen dodecahedron sculptures by Richard Harrington.

Back in Rockwell’s studio, I learned the artist acquires many of his action figures “from the 50-cent machine in Price Chopper.”

“It’s interesting that we do this [manufacture figurines] as a human race. It has to do with the idea of the common man, something my father was interested in,” Rockwell said.

The artist also exhibits paintings and works on paper, some old and some new. He pointed to his newest work in progress, a drawing with glued-on colored disks that spanned the entire rear wall.

“Doing this picture here, I’m asking, What happens when you die? Souls move into space and are disembodied. The souls learn and become one with the whole

thing. I'm not religious. I'm just interested in what happens.”

Most days Rockwell works in the studio in the morning, and again in the afternoon. “I try and be here every day,” he said. “If I'm out, go into the gallery next door. They'll let you in.”

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