

Posted on Fri, Oct. 17, 2008

New salons: Homes are where the art is

By Caroline Tiger

For The Inquirer

It's a Saturday evening inside a Rittenhouse penthouse. Music plays from discreetly concealed speakers, and guests wander in pairs at the perimeters of the handsome wood-paneled rooms.

The place is brightly lit - no dimming for atmosphere's sake - because what the people see is the point of it all.

No ordinary party, this is an art salon called Artcrush, an ephemeral group show curated by Jenny Jaskey, owner of the eponymous gallery in Northern Liberties.

The intent of such gatherings, organized by Jaskey and others in the area - sometimes in the organizer's own home - is similar to Gertrude Stein's aim in the early 1900s, when she would include movers and shakers at the Saturday evening salons at her Paris apartment.

"The art became more accepted with conversation around it, when it was in a home," Jaskey says. She'd like to see a similar blending of communities in Philadelphia.

"Except for First Friday, art events here are typically attended by artists, curators, and a handful of collectors," Jaskey says. "Art isn't as embraced by the business and social communities as it is in other cities."

For this salon, Jaskey has teamed with Matthew and Gabrielle Canno, who are lending their Center City home to display the work of two dozen cutting-edge contemporary artists from Philadelphia and New York.

On a sleek glass table in the middle of the Cannos' living room, a taxidermied red fox sits upright and alert. A couple consider it, wondering whether it's art or someone's beloved pet. (It's *Twink*, by Dan Bruce.)

In the next room, a young fellow in khakis and a crisp sport jacket looks at a quartet of large photographs hanging in a neat square over the Cannos' billiards table. A label on the wall reveals that these are *Self-Portraits by Heterosexual Men* by Gabriel Martinez.

Opposite, two pieces by Philadelphia video artists Matt Suib and Nadia Hironaka loop on a large screen above a cushy leather couch, where three artist-types powwow and eat Tootsie Rolls from a nearby glass jar.

The rooms grow more crowded - Jaskey estimates 200 guests pass through. She's a laid-back hostess, holding court among an equal number of downtown hipsters and young Rittenhouse dwellers, including some of the children of Philadelphia's most generous art patrons. In a long-sleeve black minidress, the gallerist moves from group to group.

Hugo FitzGerald, 27, a self-described "beginning collector," has never seen Randall Sellers' work before, and he's interested in the artist's meticulous drawings. He's enjoying the party as much as the art.

"This is a great way to spend a Saturday evening," FitzGerald says. If it were an art opening, he might have already had his fill. "Because it's in someone's home," he says, "I feel welcome to hang out longer."

Eye candy abounds on the Cannos' wraparound roof deck, including a spandex piece by Leeza Meksin that stretches from the top deck to the lower deck, creating an abstract shape that's visible from Rittenhouse Square - if you know where to look.

A week after Artcrush, across the city in Fishtown, there's a more intimate salon in progress at the rowhouse independent curator Eileen Tognini shares with her daughter and husband.

A section of living-room wall is hung with vintage silver pocket watches filled with cast-glass ovals printed with images that artist Jen Blazina has manipulated to look like Victorian-era silhouettes.

In the bathroom, surface artist Susan Benarcik has installed wall panels made from toothpicks glued together in a beehivelike pattern.

Twenty-five guests and a few of the artists sip wine and graze on chocolate as they move through the first floor of the house, taking it all in.

"I wanted to focus on the three-dimensional," Tognini says, "to say that it's OK to have installation or sculpture. Having art doesn't have to mean hanging a painting."

Tognini has been staging salons in her own home and with client-collaborators for the last decade.

"Work shown in a home creates a very safe environment for people to render opinions about what they love and don't love," she says.

She cites some work she installed in the branches of a tree outside her 200-year-old stone farmhouse at the base of Hawk Mountain in Berks County during "Gallery in the Garden," her annual salonlike event, which stretches over two weekends each September. The work consisted of sacs made from hair and filled with ice.

Over time, the ice melted, and the hair began to deflate and drip. Tognini was gratified to hear people gathered near the tree, sharing their disgust.

That's one benefit of a salon setting, Jaskey agrees. In a gallery, where art can feel sacred, voicing strong opinions doesn't come as naturally.

"People worry that they need a master's degree to look at contemporary art, to understand it," Jaskey says. "That's just not true. They need to see that it won't bite."

Salons also offer the chance to discover volumes about a piece directly from the artist.

In Tognini's living room, David and Joan Wenger of Center City sit on the couch chatting with artist Julia Stratton, who made the bronze sculpture that stands between them. She tells the Wengers about the Independence Foundation Grant that sent her to Russia to research a series of sculptures based on compositions by Alexander Scriabin, the turn-of-the-century classical composer. The piece they're looking at is one of them.

Tognini thinks hosting art salons satisfies her own need for constant aesthetic change. "My mom remembers that, as a 12-year-old, I'd always stay up late rearranging my room," she says.

Composing vignettes is part of the fun. She decided to place Pazia Mannella's *Medusa*, an undulating sculpture made from zippers, across the back of a low armchair.

"It's so organic, it looked like it wanted to be something else," Tognini says, "not a piece of sculpture plopped on the floor. I dubbed it 'furniture jewelry.' "

On the wall above *Medusa*, there are four pieces titled *Give and Receive* by Mannella, a 2008 Tyler School of Art graduate, that look like antique Elizabethan collars, but they're actually coffee filters dyed with blackberry tea and sewn together into oblong wreaths. A guest of Tognini's, an interior designer, buys one on the spot.

That's one more red "sold" dot than Jaskey got to stick on the wall at Artcrush. Of course, at \$90, the coffee-filter sculptures are less of a financial commitment.

And besides, Jaskey and Tognini say, salons are more about fostering community and exposure for the artists than they are about immediate sales.

"Most of the people who came had never been to something like this before," Jaskey says a few days after Artcrush. "I really just want to promote contemporary art.

"This is going to make people think about their environment more - it's going to make them think, 'What's in my home?' And, 'Wouldn't it be great to have something up on my wall that challenges me?' "

Curator Contacts

E-mail Jenny Jaskey at info@jennyjaskey.com to be added to her mailing list. For gallery exhibit information, go to www.jennyjaskey.com.

Contact Eileen Tognini at info@eileentognini.com. For information about her services, go to www.eileentognini.com.

Find this article at:

http://www.philly.com/inquirer/home_design/20081017_New_salons__Homes_are_where_the_art_is.html?adString=inq.living/home_design;!category=home_design;&randomOrd=101808042347

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright | Philly Online, LLC. All Rights Reserved. Any copying, redistribution or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the express written consent of Philly Online, LLC is expressly prohibited.

