

New Bedford art scene is lively work in progress

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By Patricia Harris and David Lyon, Globe Correspondents | October 18, 2006

NEW BEDFORD -- There's no telling what's going to pop up next in the art galleries here. The featured exhibit could be vintage motorcycles, pointillist renderings of landmark buildings, or a fisherman's photographs of life at sea. The only predictable thing about the New Bedford art scene is that it will probably confound expectations.

The galleries, in effect, are a barometer of a community on the ascendancy.

"I thought I'd never return to New Bedford," admits mixed-media artist Lasse Antonsen, who decamped to Providence in favor of better schools for his children and a more supportive environment for his art. But now he's back. "Twelve or 15 years ago I saw New Bedford just going downhill. Now there's so much energy, so much going on."

Antonsen is director of the University Art Gallery on the Star Store campus of the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. The gallery closes a show of 1960s paintings by surrealist Robert Beauchamp Saturday and opens an exhibition of artists' books on Oct. 26. When the College of Performing & Visual Arts transformed the defunct downtown-anchor department store into a state-of-the-art campus in 2001, many in New Bedford saw it as a turning point in the downtown's revitalization. Five years later, it seems they were right.

"A lot of students have stayed and they take a very active role in New Bedford's cultural life and in its politics, especially issues of preservation," Antonsen says.

Like Boston's Fort Point Channel district, New Bedford is full of old brick industrial buildings that make terrific studio spaces. There's no firm number on how many artists now call the city home, but more than 80 participated in the annual open studios event a few weeks ago. Many artists also welcome studio visits by appointment. (For information, see newbedfordopenstudios.org). The gallery at the community arts center ArtWorks! is featuring a sampler exhibition of participating artists through October.

ArtWorks! is a regular participant in the monthly cultural celebration known as AHA! Night, which has taken place on the second Thursday of every month since July 1999. Each evening packs in a dizzying array that can range from outdoor jazz concerts to walking tours, museum nights, gallery shows, dance performances, history lectures, or even visits to ongoing redevelopment projects in historic buildings.

"The people who started it were looking at making the downtown sustainable," says Margie Butler, AHA! program director. "They built on the tradition of Thursday as 'cruising night.' Everybody used to come downtown on Thursday night, spend their paycheck at the Star Store, and hang out." There's been a conscious effort in the arts community to build up local cultural activity without courting gentrification. "When you get right down to it," says Butler, "the real hook for New Bedford is authenticity."

AHA! Night brings a party atmosphere to culture, but the museums and galleries don't exactly close up shop between events. The New Bedford Art Museum, which opened in a former bank in 1996, does not have its own permanent collection but mounts three shows a year that highlight both local artists and others from around the globe. The museum has a pair of watercolor exhibitions up through December, one focusing on members of the New England Watercolor Society, the other on New Bedford landmark scenes by Mattapoisett artist Mike Mazer.

Gallery X always serves up the unexpected. The cooperative was formed in 1990 by graduates of New Bedford's Swain School of Design (which merged with UMass-Dartmouth in 1988). It purchased the 1855 Universalist Church on William Street in 1998 and transformed it into a lively arts center. Tonight the gallery has a velvet painting contest to celebrate the opening of the GothiX exhibit as well as an improvisational jazz performance in its regular Audible Think series.

Nilsa García-Rey, Gallery X's director, says the group, which fluctuates between 35 and 40 members, mounts about 10 exhibitions a year, with two big shows open to the community: "New Work" in April and "Public Hanging" in August-

September. As the pioneer institution in New Bedford's current art scene, the gallery has seen a lot of changes.

“The renovation of the Star Store changed things drastically,” says García-Rey, who moved to New Bedford from Cambridge. “It's attracting cutting-edge artists making artwork in nontraditional materials.” At the same time, more studios are going into the old mill buildings. And she believes the artists are in New Bedford for the long haul. “We're a stubborn fisherman town,” she says, “where people are very proud.”

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How to get there

About 60 miles or 1 1/4 hours from Boston. Take Interstate 93 south to Route 24 south to exit 12. Follow Route 140 south to Interstate 195 east. Take exit 15 (Route 18) to downtown.

What to do

University Art Gallery

715 Purchase St.

508-999-8555

umassd.edu/universityartgallery

Daily 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; free.

ArtWorks!

384 Acushnet Ave.

508-984-1588

artworksforyou.org

Tuesday-Saturday noon-5, free.

New Bedford Art Museum 608 Pleasant St.

508-961-3072

newbedfordartmuseum.org

Wednesday-Sunday noon-5, adults \$3, seniors and students \$2, under age 17 free. Extended hours in summer.

Gallery X

169 William St.

508-992-2675

galleryx.org

Wednesday-Sunday 11 a.m.-3 p.m.; free; \$5 suggested donation for Audible Think. ■