

INSIGHTS



into suburbia



insights into suburbia

Curated by Esther Thyssen and Penny Dell

Opalka Gallery
Sage College of Albany
Albany, New York
September 4 - October 21, 2007

Robert L. Ringel Gallery
Purdue University Galleries
West Lafayette, Indiana
January 7th - February 17, 2008

Additional venues to be announced



Ludlow Bix Smethurst
Pic-nic
2001, Oil on canvas, 30X30"

insights into suburbia

INTRODUCTION

Members of the National Association of Women Artists (N.A.W.A.) submitted a range of work in response to the call for entries for the “Insights into Suburbia” exhibition. The artworks fell into two broad categories. A large portion related to the physical nature of suburbia, such as its location, built structures, public and private spaces, layouts and limits, as well as the accessibility and utility of various forms of nature. Some clearly blurred the distinctions between suburban, small town and rural environments, revealing the uncertainty about physical suburbia itself. The other broad category of images related to the social and psychological ramifications of suburban living, individual and group experiences, group dynamics and the development and use of social networks, as well as the experience of personal life within this environment.

Suburbs, for census purposes, are communities of 2,500 residents or more that lie within the 35 metropolitan areas of the USA. The 2000 census recognized 2,586 suburbs, and also defined new, suburban-like communities named boomburbs, with more than 100,000 residents that are the size of cities within their metropolitan areas. Boomburbs exist mostly in the Southwest. They are the 53 master-planned communities not patterned on typically urban forms, possessing an expansive periphery and a small center. More recently settlements that resemble suburbs yet grow outside of metropolitan boundaries, and attain metropolitan size without developed business cores have been named micropolitan areas. There are 567 micropolitan areas mostly in the South and Midwest. Typical pre- and post-World War II suburbs with well-defined cores within metropolitan boundaries are principally features of the East and Midwest.¹

By 1970, the U.S. had become a suburban-dominated nation, when more than half of all metropolitan residents lived outside central cities but inside metropolitan boundaries.² Suburban neighborhoods had thus become important for sociological studies, and critics of suburbia commonly focused on the physical layout as an impediment to developing an integrated lifestyle.³ But since the early 1990s, researchers have shown that the suburban housing structure has not blocked the development of meaningful social relationships outside the single family home typical of suburban settings.⁴ Most recent research demonstrates that suburban neighborhoods possess considerable social capital, created principally by women (particularly the stay-at-home moms of pre-school children), and perpetuated by women who join the work force as part-time earners when their children reach

middle-school.⁵ The equilibrium of suburbia has depended on the two-parent, male bread-winner family model, and the acceptance by the mothers of a lack of gender equity.⁶ But as several images in this exhibition – as well as the most recent census figures – demonstrate, this reality of suburbia is being eroded as two-career families and urban-type households become part of suburban communities.⁷ The new suburbs include single-parent families, families with no children, and non-family households which make up 29 percent of all suburban households nationwide.⁸

The images in the exhibition represent the many realities of contemporary suburbia. Some artwork is based on the direct experience of suburban landscapes and lifestyles, while others represent the outsider’s assessments of the changing entity that is suburban America. Entries were received from all corners of the country, but northeastern submissions dominated other regions, which correlates with the census distribution of suburbs across the U.S. The visual content of the artworks and the careful analysis of images in the “Insights into Suburbia” exhibition reveal much about the nature and texture of our suburban communities as they enter a new phase. The artworks highlight suburban realities less clearly captured by census figures and sociological studies.

Some ensuing descriptions and interpretations include excerpts from texts supplied by the artists themselves, used in conjunction with the images to develop the focal points of the exhibition. When artists’ notes are incorporated, they are followed by the initials of the artist and the date of correspondence in parentheses.

Esther Thyssen

Guest Curator

1. Bruce Katz and Robert E. Lang, eds., *Redefining Urban and Suburban America: Evidence from Census 2000*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003, vol. 1 & 2

2. Katz and Lang, vol. 1, p. 237

3. Jan A. Dizard and Howard Gadlin *The Minimal Family*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990 and Rosalyn Baxandall & Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

4. B. M. Kelly, *Expanding the American Dream*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993 and R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

5. Sally Bould, “Caring Neighborhoods: Bringing Up the Kids Together,” *Journal of Family Issues*, 2003, vol 24, p. 438.

6. Bould, 2003, p.437.

7. Katz and Lang, p.273.

8. Katz and Lang, p. 271.

[2] Kay Lemoreaux Buckner
Yesterday's Rainbows
1998, Oil on canvas, 28x38"



SUBURBAN SPACES, NATURE AND PHYSICAL LIMITS

The complex metropolitan landscapes that include suburbs also encompass highways, malls, and office parks. This helps to confuse our sense of suburbia, and not-too-distant rural towns, outlying developments with tract mansions, and micropolitan areas are also felt to belong to the category. However, suburbs are found within metropolitan limits and consist predominantly of single-family structures.

Different types of single-family homes provided inspiration for the three artists who focused on this feature of suburbia. Neighborhoods with front lawns and small colonial style houses became popular at the same time the sitcoms on television expounded their virtues in the '50s and '60s.¹ Such regularly spaced and uniformly sized structures are the focus of *Northeast Suburb* [fig. 1] by Toni Silber-Deliverie. The artist considers "suburban tract housing a metaphor for predictability" (TSD 27 June 07), which was one of the features enjoyed by those who relocated from inner cities. Traditional suburbs from the Los Angeles area are the subject of Kay Lemoreaux Buckner's paintings. The streamlined design of the large single family home in *Yesterday's Rainbows* [fig. 2] reflects the glamour of the jazz age in Hollywood (KLB 27 June 07). The transforming nature of Hurricane Katrina in the suburbs of New Orleans impressed Willie Marlowe and her *Flood Plain: New Orleans Suburb* conveys the cavalcade of destruction caused by natural forces upon the man made structures.



[1] Toni Silber-Deliverie
Northeast Suburb
n.d., Oil on canvas, 30x30"

Despite exterior similarity between suburban homes, life within has its unique character. Marlowe's *House with Exposed Interior* [fig. 3] is an inadvertent glimpse at privacy, while Deborah Beck's *Night Dreams* [fig. 4] conveys the acquired uniqueness of standard interiors as "individual and personal life stories and journeys are transpiring" (DB 11 June 07). Windows are an important feature of all homes. They are markers that designate boundaries which also serve to protect the interior. Penny Dell's woodcut images of windows titled *Dawn* and *Dusk* are sentinels guarding personal space and interiority (PD 22 May 07). Rita Kaleel's *Window* represents "a removal from the hustle/bustle [of] sounds and scenes ... and the thought of looking through an opening of foliage to view the landscape beyond" (RDK 9 June 07).



[3] Willie Marlowe
House with Exposed Interior
2006, Acrylic on canvas, 11½ x 11¼"

[4] Deborah Beck
Night Dreams
1997, Monotype, 8x11"





[5] Joanna First
Summer's Shade
1994, Acrylic on canvas, 54x72"

SOCIAL STRUCTURES, NETWORKS AND LIFE IN THE SUBURBS

Many artists have addressed social characteristics of life in the suburbs that recall the television sitcoms of the '50s and '60s: *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*. Adele Grodstein's oils and Eileen Downes' collages represent images from suburbia which were prefigured in these shows, and continue to attract families today. One is the desirability of public schools, some of which function like private schools thanks to the countless hours of volunteering provided by parents on a regular basis. *Mrs. Eaton's Homeroom* is composed like the class photographs taken each year. In Grodstein's painting, the children are portrayed as happy; they wear their own comfortable clothes and have the freedom to twist and grimace, even as their picture is being taken. Some girls are wearing Brownie outfits for the Girl Scout meeting after school. These children are comfortable with who they are, and they all seem to like their teacher, Mrs. Eaton, standing in the back row on the left, just a little taller than the boys and girls.

The presence of nature is taken for granted in suburban settings. Even if the plots are uniform and small, they represent the opportunity to be outdoors and experience nature. In this context, a shady spot in one's yard, or simply the view of grass as painted by Joanna First in *Afternoon Delight* and *Summer's Shade* [fig. 5], evoke the transcendental pleasures, originally one of the root motivations of suburban settlements. Mildred Kaye's *View from the Meadowlands* [fig. 6] gives us another view of nature. This digital print shows how the natural landscape surrounding a metropolis succumbs to the stresses of sprawl, occasionally creating a luminous mirage. But nowadays commuters can escape further and further into the countryside, to experience less tainted forms of nature.

Barbara Baird's vivid paintings guide us along the double yellow lines that mark the roads which lead out of metropolitan regions. *Blue Road in Autumn* and *Winter Road* each cut an energetic path through the landscape, between the trees, sizzling with colorful leaves in the fall, and reduced to woody tissue in winter. The firm gash of the road surface and the double yellow lines convey a sense of urgency with which to reach the goal beyond the horizon. While the place to which we travel remains invisible from our view, we desire it with the same intensity as the energy of the road itself.



[6] Mildred Kaye
View from the Meadowlands
2004, Digital print, 15x33"

In the suburbs, schools are important for community building, and families often make personal connections with other parents at their childrens' schools. School functions provide platforms for networking which extend into the wider community, an example of which is Grodstein's *Haworth Run* [fig. 7]. The principle participants are the children of the community, but "senior citizens, and experienced tri-athletes [also] came out to compete in the *Haworth Run*. As the time came for the whistle to start the one-mile Fun Run, all the children jockeyed for position" (AD 9June 07). Some faces are thrust toward the viewer with total abandon, suggesting complete trust in the circumstances—after all, the event had been organized by their parents! Indeed, Grodstein's *The Hurricanes* [fig. 8] shows us some of the parents who have formed a moms' soccer team. They are the successful mothers of suburbia—they managed to keep their male-breadwinner families together, and managed to survive as stay-at-home moms or as part-time workers to support every need of their families. And most importantly, they too are able to enjoy the benefits of many years of investment in the social fabric of their neighborhood. In fact, the male coach seated on the right is the town mayor (AD 9June 07)!



[7] Adele Grodstein
The Haworth Run
1989, Oil on canvas, 26x36"



[8] Adele Grodstein
The Hurricanes
1988, Oil on canvas, 38x46"

Downes' collages, *Relaxing in the Stroller* [fig. 9] and *Playing Soccer*, convey a similar suburbia. "The pink baby sneakers with one sock slightly drooping down is symbolic imagery associated with the hectic but rewarding life of a suburban mother raising her children. Likewise the soccer shoe and looming star-studded soccer ball is also symbolic of the "Soccer Mom's" life that is so prevalent in our U.S. suburban culture" (ED n.d. [May 07]). To enjoy the benefits of the suburban social network, one must accept certain norms of behavior that are dependent on conformity. The young girls in Maria Spector's *In Line Girls* series stand near one another, and their lineup is disrupted only by one monochrome figure in each composition [fig. 10]. "This asks the viewer to think in what way must we all tow the line? Is our suppression of individual identity in favor of our public identity necessary for acceptance and success? Does a majority suburban country inform and exacerbate our need to conform (MS 11 June 07)?"



[9] Eileen Downes
Relaxing in the Stroller
2006, Collage, 18x24"



[10] Maria Spector
In Line Girls III
2004, Oil on canvas, 9X12"

The qualities people continue to seek in suburban living are primarily related to the social capital cultivated within suburban communities. Beyond family life, private experiences within one's home and yard are similarly cherished by suburbanites. Ludlow Smethurst's *Pic-nic* [frontispiece], Ruth Poniarsky's *Celebration* [fig. 11], and the more abstract work of Kathy Stark bring focus onto intimate interactions. The people in *Pic-nic* and in *Celebration* gather around tables. The glass of wine and birthday cake provide physical focal points, but the emphases derive from the atmosphere of the gathering, the sheer pleasure of getting together. The family group in *Celebration* barely emerges from the warm brown mist of the interior to project the feel of loving familiarity generated by the togetherness of several generations. The high key colors, flattened surfaces and tilted planes in *Pic-nic* on the other hand, contribute to the mood of nonchalance displayed by the middle-aged suburban middle class.

An even more personal intimacy is revealed by the densely wrought notebook pages of Kathy Stark. *Echoes of the Past* and *Conversations with my Mother* [fig. 12] chronicle words repeated over time, shared in confidence, and recalled intermittently: whisperings of caution, wisdom, caring, and advice of all sorts, noted down, page after page, always earnest, always good to recall. Stark's images of writing portray the fiber of human bonds in another way.

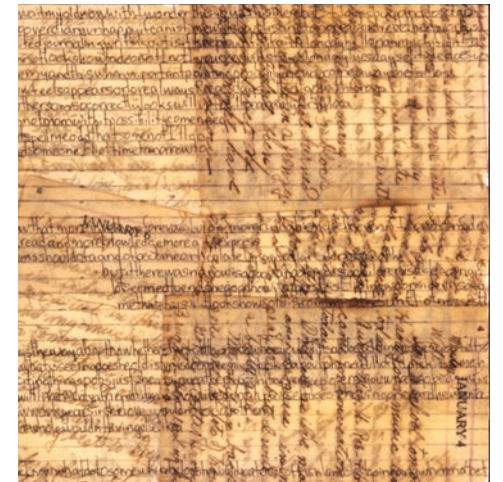


[11] Ruth Poniarski
Celebration
1998, Acrylic on canvas, 44x56"



[13] Kelly Nelson
Home
2006, Watercolor/mixed media, 9x15"

The script is like the softened silk of a wrapped cocoon, and the words are writ over and over to assure the bond between mothers and their children. This is the bond for which women let promising careers go, the bond through which happiness skills attempt to pass. The abstract elements in Kelly M. Nelson's *Home* [fig. 13] are equally evocative. "The square shapes are based on the Fibonacci numbers as well as the sewn spiral. The Fibonacci series represents healthy growth in natural objects, such as a conch shell and trees. The colors and images fit into this healthy growth and are connected by the spiral as I recall my childhood, happy, safe and healthy" (KMN 20June 07).



[12] Kathy Stark
Conversations with my Mother
2006, Mixed media, 8x8"



[14] Ennid Berger
Suburban Contemplation
2003, silver gelatin print, 14x11”

Ennid Berger, on the other hand, restages some of the undesirable modalities of suburban communities. *Suburban Contemplation* [fig. 14] features an undressed and hairless female mannequin, elegantly posed facing the shelves of an open refrigerator. The opened door is behind her, enclosing the lean body within the wedge of space where the cold air escaping from the fridge is palpable. While we cannot identify the objects stored in the door pockets, we recognize the soft drink bottle and juice carton, plastic meat trays and leftover containers stacked on the shelves inside the fridge. This busy area on the left is divided by the strong edges of the shelves that converge toward the right and aim at the smooth body of the mannequin. Now we see the contrast between the smooth surfaces of the torso, and the surfaces of the head and neck, which have been cracked in patterns resembling injuries to human tissue. This contrast serves a double purpose. The mannequin can thus stand for the alienated self of a conforming woman who performs expected chores routinely, as well as represent the human suffering such restraint engenders even when living amidst material abundance. What then, is the substance of this suburban contemplation? Has this woman suppressed her self to such an extent that she has become indifferent to physical pain, and contemplative only of material abundance?

Berger probes similar issues in *Car Pool* and *In Bed #2*: . “The mannequin, though inanimate, brings life to the question of material comfort amidst the conformity and expectations of the suburban ideal” (EB 13June 07).

Some of the ill effects of contemporary pressures are the subject of lone Citrin’s *Medicine Chest* [fig.15]. Here the target shape, blank voodoo dolls and multitude of hypodermic needles evoke the culture of overmedication prevalent among the comfortable inhabitants of the suburbs. But Citrin also calls attention to the psychological traumas and troubling realities that coexist with bliss as elements of urban living are transferred to the suburbs.



[15] lone Citrin
Medicine Chest
2006, Mixed media, diameter 25”

Linda Lippa also addressed these urban imports: "... I have attempted to portray the modern suburban existence in which Ozzie and Harriet are dead and the viewer is forced to confront the social and economic realities of the 21st century. In *American Goth* [fig.16], the blond-haired, blue-eyed suburban cheerleader flirting with the high school quarterback has been replaced by a goth who happily chats up an equally contemporary 'boy next door.' In *Bag Lady* [fig. 17], the 20th century suburban cottage with the white picket fence has been replaced with the 21st century realities of poverty and homelessness, which have invaded even the suburbs" (LL 11Jun 07).

[16] Linda Lippa
American Goth
2001, Oil on canvas, 30x40"



[17] Linda Lippa
Bag Lady
1987, Acrylic on canvas, 24x48"

The new characteristics of suburban households quantified by the 2000 census are also featured in the works of Lisa D. Weinblatt and Mildred Kaye. Weinblatt's *School Lunch #6* depicts adult-size pupils from multicultural backgrounds. According to the artist, this painting is part of a series based on actual educational settings. *Man/Woman 2* [fig. 18] depicts a private setting, the interior of a single-family home, but addresses a similarly contemporary topic, the "...changing and sometimes confusing roles of women in contemporary suburbia" (LW 13June 07). By the last decade of the last century, population and household dynamics of suburbs began to shift, and many inner-ring suburbs in the Northeast and Midwest acquired central-city-like characteristics, including population decline even in the face of increase in the total number of households. The existing infrastructure is becoming insufficient as growth occurs in single-parent and non-family households. Two-parent families with children have shrunk to 27 percent of suburban populations nationwide, surpassed by married couples with no children at 29 percent.² But some residents of suburbia attempt to resist the change, as Kaye's *Homophobicon* [fig. 19] portrays. Here, multi-racial residents of traditional backgrounds are joined together in active demonstration against the influx of same-sex couples.



[18] Lisa D. Weinblatt
Man/Woman 2
1997, Oil on canvas, 66x80"

These images by more than 25 artists from all regions of the U.S. coalesce into a kaleidoscope of perceptions about suburbia. The meanings captured through the artistic lens of contemporary women artists most often convey memories of personal history, and also display a keen sense for ongoing change, as they predict the closing of an era. Roberta Crown's *Hyperspace #15* [fig. 20] on the other hand, makes visible the feel of bombastic growth elsewhere, in the newer, micropolitan-type settlements.

1. Dolores Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004, p.90
2. Katz and Lang, vol. 1, p.117



[19] Mildred Kaye
Homophobicon
2005, Watercolor, 14x36"



[20] Roberta Crown
Hyperspace #15
2000, Acrylic on canvas, 37x37"

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EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Barbara Baird
Blue Road in Autumn, 2005, oil on canvas, 40x30"
Butterfly on Double Yellow, 2005, oil on canvas, 24x24"
Winter Road, 2007, oil on canvas, 24x18"

Deborah Beck
Night Dreams, 1997, monotype, 8x11"

Ennid Berger
Suburban Contemplation, 2003, silver gelatin print, 14x11"
In Bed #2, 2003, silver gelatin print, 11x14"
Car Pool, 2003, silver gelatin print, 14x11"

Suzanne Bloomfield
For Sale Land, n.d., monoprint, 20x 15"
Lonely, n.d., monoprint, 20x15"

Kay Lemoreaux Buckner
Yesterday's Rainbows, 1998, oil on canvas, 28x38"
Bel Geddes' Dream, 2000, oil on canvas, 23x32"

Ione Citrin
Medicine Chest, 2006, mixed media, diameter 25"

Roberta Crown,
Hyperspace #15, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 37x37"

Penny Dell
Maquette, 2004, etching, 13x13"
Dawn, 2004, woodcut, 48x28"
Dusk, 2004, woodcut, 48x28"

Rita Dianni-Kaleel
Window, 2006, oil, gold leaf on canvas, 40x30"

Eileen Downes
Relaxing in the Stroller, 2006, collage, 18x24"
Playing Soccer, 2006, collage, 24x18"

Joan Easton
Orange Chiffon, 2002, mixed media, 12x10"

Harriet FeBland
House with View, n.d., pencil, 6 3/4x5"

Joanna First
Afternoon Delight, 2002, mixed media, 46x68"
Beyond the Grass, 2003, mixed media, 60x50"
Summer's Shade, 1994, acrylic on canvas, 54x72"

Adele Grodstein
The Haworth Run, 1989, oil on canvas, 26x36"
The Hurricanes, 1988, oil on canvas, 38x46"
Mrs. Eaton's Homeroom, 1984, oil on canvas, 38x40"

Mildred Kaye
View from the Meadowlands, 2004, digital print, 15x33"
Homophobicon, 2005, watercolor, 14x36"

Linda Lipka
American Goth, 2001, oil on canvas, 30x40"
Bag Lady, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 24x48"

harriet regina marion
Richville, 2007, mixed media, 32x26"
Hopewell, 2007, mixed media, 32x26"

Willie Marlowe
House with Exposed Interior, 2006, acrylic on paper, 11 1/2 x 11 1/4"
Moving Day, 2007, acrylic on paper, 11 1/2 x 13 1/2"
Flood Plain: New Orleans Suburb, 2007, acrylic on paper, 11x11"

Kelly Nelson
Home, 2006, watercolor/mixed media, 9x15"
Ominivore's Dilemma, 2007, lithograph/mixed media, 10x8"

Ruth Poniarski
Celebration, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 44x56"
Television, 2002, acrylic on canvas, 40x54"

Deborah Rubin
Red and White Train, 2003, watercolor, 22x 30"
Yellow Train, 1999, watercolor, 22x30"
Edge of the Plains, 1990, oil pastel, 20x40"

Laura Schiavina
Summer Barbeque, 1999, mixed media, 30x24"

Toni Silber-Delerive
Northeast Suburb, n.d., oil on canvas, 24x20"
Circular Development, n.d., oil on canvas, 36x36"

Ludlow Bix Smethurst
Pic-nic, 2001, oil on canvas, 30x30"

Maria Spector
In Line Girls I, 2004, oil on canvas, 9x12"
In Line Girls III, 2004, oil on canvas, 9x12"
In Line Girls IV, 2004, oil on canvas, 9x12"

Kathy Stark
Echoes of the Past, 2007, mixed media, 8x8"
Conversations with my Mother, 2006, mixed media, 8x8"

Sonia Stark
Schoolbus, 2005, pastel, 38x28"

Merril Steiger
Water Park, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 48x72"

Lisa D. Weinblatt
Man/Woman 2, 1997, oil on canvas, 66x80"
School Lunch 6, 2002, oil on canvas, 54x80"



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN ARTISTS

NAWA was founded in 1889. It is the oldest professional women's fine art organization in the United States. It provides a forum for women artists to share ideas and to exhibit their work. Through its exhibitions, programs and archive NAWA fosters awareness of the monumental contribution of women to the history of American art. The organization is inclusive and serves professional women artists of all backgrounds and traditions.

In January of 1889, five innovative women, barred from full participation in the male-dominated National Academy of Design and the Society of American Artists, founded the Women's Art Club. The organization flourished and in 1913 was renamed the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors, reflecting its national influence and the increasing number of women sculptors. Through the 1920s the organization was sponsoring exhibitions nationally and abroad. In 1930 with over 1,000 members the organization opened its Argent Galleries on 57th Street in New York City. In 1941 the organization changed its name to the National Association of Women artists. Currently its headquarters and gallery are located at 80 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1405, New York, NY 10011.

Early exhibitions included works by notable artists Mary Cassatt, Suzanne Valadon, Rosa Bonheur, Malvina Hoffman, and Cecelia Beaux. Over the years the organization attracted many talented members who achieved great recognition for their work. Among them are Louise Nevelson, Dorothy Dehner, Cleo Hartwig, Minna Citron, Nell Blaine, Alice Neel, Marisol, Pat Adams, Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Janet Fish, Audrey Flack, Lois Mailou Jones.

NAWA is equally proud to include women whose names may not be familiar, yet whose work merits recognition. NAWA sponsors juried traveling and national exhibitions in university and corporate galleries, art centers and museums, in the US and abroad. Educational materials and programs accompany them whenever possible. For more information please visit www.nawanet.org



OPALKA GALLERY

Sage College of Albany
140 New Scotland Avenue
Albany, NY 12208

Jim Richard Wilson, Director
tel: 518.292.7742 fax: 518.292.1903
www.sage.edu/sca/opalkagallery

Opalka Gallery is the formal exhibition facility of The Sage Colleges. Located on the Sage Albany campus, the Opalka's primary concentration is on work by professional artists from outside the region. An important aspect of the cultural life in the Capital Region, the Gallery frequently features multidisciplinary projects and hosts poetry readings, recitals, and symposia, often in conjunction with its exhibitions.

The Opalka Gallery was constructed in 2002 with funds donated by the Opalka family. The 7,400 square-foot facility includes a vaulted gallery and a 75-seat lecture hall with Internet connectivity. The Opalka replaced Rathbone Gallery, which served The Sage Colleges for 25 years and garnered international attention for the quality and significance of its exhibitions.

Opalka Gallery is a member of the Exhibition Alliance, the Association of College and University Museums and Galleries, and the Museum Association of New York.

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