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A SPACE OF ITS OWN

Sage's Opalka Gallery an ascending star in college art scene

BY TIM KANE SPECIAL TO THE TIMES UNION

As the director of the former Rathbone Gallery at Sage College of Albany, the last thing Jim Richard Wilson would do to entice an artist or an outside curator to stage an exhibition was to actually send them a photo of the space itself. These days, the first thing Wilson does as the head of the Opalka Gallery on the same campus is to include as many photos as possible in a proposal and then quickly invite prospective exhibitors to visit.

"The Rathbone had a nice reputation built up over the years, but I wonder if many of the shows wouldn't have happened if people had seen the space beforehand," Wilson admitted recently.

The 3,200-square-foot Opalka is a flashy, stand-alone space on par with any gallery on a college campus, while the cramped Rathbone, now known as the Little Gallery, shares its site with other college offices at the center of the campus.

Five years ago this fall, the \$3 million Opalka Gallery opened at the corner of New Scotland and Academy roads at the school's main entrance, a location that underscores the growing importance of art to the small college, now with more than 40 percent of its students studying visual and decorative arts.

And with the Opalka being so visible in the heart of Albany at a main intersection, it's the area's least-removed academic gallery from its neighboring community, said one longtime arts observer, a fact that heightens its impact on the Albany arts scene in a palpable way.

"Other college galleries are often secluded on their own campuses and cut off in a way," said David Brickman, a photographer, former local art critic and a member of the Albany Center Gallery exhibitions committee. "Being at such a central location, out front, makes the Opalka different."

Finding a niche

In a relatively quick amount of time, the Opalka Gallery has cultivated a niche all its own that has catapulted it to being one of the top galleries in the region. Not only is the Opalka garnering more and more attention here, but it has a growing reputation in the loftier circles of the New York City art world.

"Every show they put on is of museum quality," said Anita Shapolsky, director of the Shapolsky Gallery in Manhattan, who co-curated a show at the Opalka with Wilson in 2005 on the legendary collector Betty Parsons. "Jim is really knowledgeable and knows how to put a good show together equal to anybody. People here want to work with him."

Part of the Opalka's ascendancy is undoubtedly due to its first-rate design that begs viewers to slow down and contemplate art. Its unique skylights and accompanying track lighting bathe artwork in light that shifts with movements of the sun and changing conditions.

A small lecture hall under the same roof provides a space for discussions and other programming, while a sizable foyer has been the location of several outside fundraisers, including ones for the Albany Symphony Orchestra and the Parsons Child and Family Center.

An interesting mix

Yet it's the interesting mix on its exhibition schedule that sets the Opalka apart from other area college and university galleries such as the Tang Museum at Skidmore College, University Art Museum at the University at Albany, the Williams College Museum of Art and the Mandeville Gallery at Union College. Its 25 exhibits have struck an uncanny balance between importing paintings, drawings and sculpture from elsewhere and highlighting local artists and culture in a way the others generally haven't.

"It's doing a little bit of everything really well," said Colleen Skiff, director of the Fulton Street Gallery in Troy, who has worked with Wilson over the years. "I think he's really just getting started. He's definitely one to watch."

Roughly half the exhibits have delved into abstract expressionism, showcasing lesser-known artists such as Jon Schuler, Frank Wimberley, Terrance Tiernan and Richard Richenburg. A 2005 retrospective titled "The New York School: Another View" curated by Wilson is credited with pushing the fledgling gallery's reputation to new heights.

"That was a watershed show for us," Wilson said. "It has opened up things for us in terms of acceptance and future exhibitions. We had a lot of interest to put that show on the road, but several key pieces couldn't be loaned."

For Wilson, the exhibit, insured at a value of \$3 million, represented the culmination of years of curatorial work in abstract expressionism that began in 1979 when he was a young gallery director for Peter S. Loonam Gallery in Bridgehampton, Suffolk County, a then-bucolic refuge for many greats of the genre.

"It was so different then," Wilson recalled. "You could walk into Bobby Van's and see DeKooning, Jimmy Ernst, James Brooks and writers such as Kurt Vonnegut." He arrived in this region in the late 1980s to take an arts-related job with the State University of New York's Central Administration and began working with several community galleries outside his official duties. He moved to Sage in 1992.

Experience, perspective

Wilson's combination of more than a decade of experience in the New York City scene and nearly a decade working with local artists has given him the perspective that has translated to the Opalka's eclectic offerings.

Aside from the penchant for abstract expressionists, the gallery has twice hosted the annual, nearly three-decades-old Photography Regional of the Capital Region, and held a series of exhibits exploring the Jewish communities in Albany, Schenectady and Troy that received much acclaim. It also hosted several smaller, short-term exhibits specializing in art made by people with disabilities and foster children.

To date, the show exploring the Schenectady Jewish culture is the only one to travel to

other institutions in other cities, but an exhibit scheduled for later this year, dubbed "Insight Into Suburbia," is originating at the Opalka in the fall with at least one stop at Purdue University already on the itinerary.

The Opalka isn't relying just on abstract expressionism, regional group shows, or local historical exhibits to broaden its reputation. It also sees itself playing a role in highlighting emerging contemporary artists primarily from outside the area - although the gallery might even champion someone local.

"I won't rule out someone from this area, but it depends on a lot of things," Wilson said. "We have a strong mission to work on bringing art (from) outside to the region for our community, faculty and students. I want to be a voice in contemporary art, beyond this area, too."

Case in point is New York City-based Robert Beck. Last fall, the Opalka held an exhibit exploring Beck's art in his first major solo exhibition. Wilson commissioned Helen Molesworth, chief curator of exhibits at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, to write the accompanying essay. After the Opalka commission, Molesworth opted to devote a larger show to Beck later this year, pushing him on to the national stage.

"A lot of it was timing," Wilson says. "But I really think we can have an influence in contemporary art as well. We're going that way. You'll see more of that now that things are getting organized."

'Perfect opportunity' brings gallery to life

By 2000, eight years of planning for a new multimillion dollar gallery at the Sage College in Albany seemed doomed. Years of searching for a single major donor to provide linchpin financing for the ambitious project had yielded no results.

Sage officials had decided to move on with the other part of the expansion plan, to build new art studios. Aging facilities were seen as lessening the school's competitiveness in attracting quality art students, while a major gallery was viewed as important, but not as key as the classrooms.

Only months later, gallery director Jim Richard Wilson received a totally unexpected

phone call from President Jeanne Neff, who asked if Wilson was sitting down. Preparing for more bad news, Wilson stood up, awaiting the worst.

"She said that Chet Opalka had pledged \$1 million, and the plans were to break ground as soon as possible," Wilson recalled recently. "I was stunned. He came out of the blue and surprised us all."

Opalka, 59, who co-founded the pharmaceutical research company Albany Molecular, had just joined the board of Sage in 1999 after his oldest child had graduated from Sage with a degree in graphic design. Seeing the important role Sage played in the community and how strong its art department was, Opalka wanted to get involved.

"I knew of the overall plans and realized how a major gallery could enhance the experience for the students as well as the community," Opalka said recently. "It seemed the gallery was quite important, so since I was just retired, the opportunity was perfect."

With preliminary site work under way, the attacks on 9/11 put the gallery in jeopardy again. The massive recovery efforts taking place in lower Manhattan meant that the funds the college hoped to raise locally to cover the remaining \$2 million dried up as philanthropic money was diverted to New York City.

Opalka then wrote another check for \$1 million to keep the project on track. "It was in the back of our mind to contribute more," Opalka said, "but with 9/11 there was a realization the gallery might not happen (if we didn't give more), so it made sense."

- Tim Kane

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