

Studio Place Arts reopens: Barre's art and community center

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Sue Higby, director, left, and Athena Petra Tasiopoulos in the main gallery at Studio Place Arts in Barre which is set to reopen to the public Tuesday. Photo: Jeb Wallace-Brodeur/Staff Photo

On Tuesday, the front doors of Studio Place Arts — the physical, malachite green and purplish-blue doors facing Main Street in Barre — reopen to the public. Visitors in limited numbers, wearing facemasks and socially distancing, may again walk into the galleries and have the unparalleled experience of seeing original art there up close and in person.

While the COVID-19 shutdown closed the physical space of Studio Place Arts for a quarter of 2020 —SPA's 20th anniversary year — the visual art institution has been wide open online. Online exhibitions, interviews with artists, children's activities and more have brought SPA into homes and onto mobile devices, accessible around the world.

SPA is the first of central Vermont's arts organizations to reopen to the public. Its reopening attests to this community arts center's agility in dealing with the unexpected and its dedication to making visual arts accessible — as its website says: “Learn Art, Love Art, Live Art.”

“The story of SPA is a story of strength and recovery,” said Sue Higby, SPA's executive director.

“We have struggled through multiple floods, a nearly two-year closure during the Main Street Reconstruction Project and an international economic collapse in 2008. SPA was built with love and spirit – it will continue with these same sentiments,” said Higby.

The spirit of SPA shines in the organization's 20 years of serving the community as well as in its energetic response to the pandemic shutdown and its carefully planned reopening.

Founders include artists Janet Van Fleet, Georgia Landau and Maggie Neale who continue to have studios in the historic building. From the beginning, the founders anticipated that SPA would be a hub of artistic activity, with artists' studios, classes and a gallery. Its 1999 prospectus noted that the center, the only one of its kind in the area, would likely draw visitors from as far as 30 miles away.

SPA has delivered that and more.

Artists exhibiting at SPA come from central Vermont, but also from around the state, other states, and sometimes other countries, as with its 2010 collaboration with Japan's University of Nagoya. Visitors walk in from Main Street, but also travel considerable distances for exhibitions and for classes.

Fifteen working artists — painters, sculptors, printmakers among them — currently have studios in the building, the “Live Art” leg of the SPA trifecta. The studios provide professional space where they focus on their own work but are also in a community of artists, exchanging ideas and inspiration.

One of SPA's top priorities is demystifying art, letting visitors see processes and encouraging them to explore their own creativity. Studio doors are usually open, so visitors see and talk with artists at work.

“Walking through the building someone may see Autumn (Tomlinson) carving her prints, Georgia (Landau) with clay, me sawing wood and metal. It's a mishmash of lots of different kinds of art being made,” Van Fleet said.

“The art community can't be an isolated group. If we believe art is important to our culture, the circle has to be made wider and wider. Art should not be seen as something only the cognoscenti can do. Art making is a natural function of being human,” Van Fleet said.

One studio is occupied by the recipient of the SPA's annual Studio Residency Program residency, now in its fifth year. An emerging artist, selected from among many applicants, is awarded rent free use of a studio for 11 months to build a new body of work for a SPA solo exhibition. Tomlinson of Montpelier who uses woodblock carving in her printmaking is the 2020 resident.

Education, the “Learn Art” leg of SPA, includes classes, workshops, artist talks and presentations. The calendar in “normal” times typically includes over 120 each year with offerings for all ages, including abundant programming for children and diverse adult classes.

SPA has long had a vibrant online presence, but with the shutdown, Higby has organized even more. A prehistoric cave painting project, building stone cairns and inuksuks, and a delightful drawing game have been among the weekly youth-focused art challenges on SPA's Facebook page.

Interviews with artists introduce viewers to their work and processes. Online tours take viewers to the physical exhibitions at SPA. A new digital exhibition "Shelter in Place" with artwork created during the shutdown by eight artists opened June 5.

The founding vision for SPA was for one gallery. Today, SPA has four galleries in the building, presenting over 20 original shows each year. SPA is also involved beyond its own walls, including in Barre's Morse Block Deli.

This "Love Art" component of SPA has given viewers opportunities to see artwork by hundreds, probably thousands, of artists through the years.

SPA's Main Floor Gallery typically features group shows with artwork by 20 to 35 or so artists. The second and third floor galleries often have solo or dual shows. The new Quick Change Gallery in a repurposed telephone booth provides a space where a body of work can be put up quickly, without expansive layout.

Two exhibitions recur each year. "Rock Solid," presented every autumn, showcases

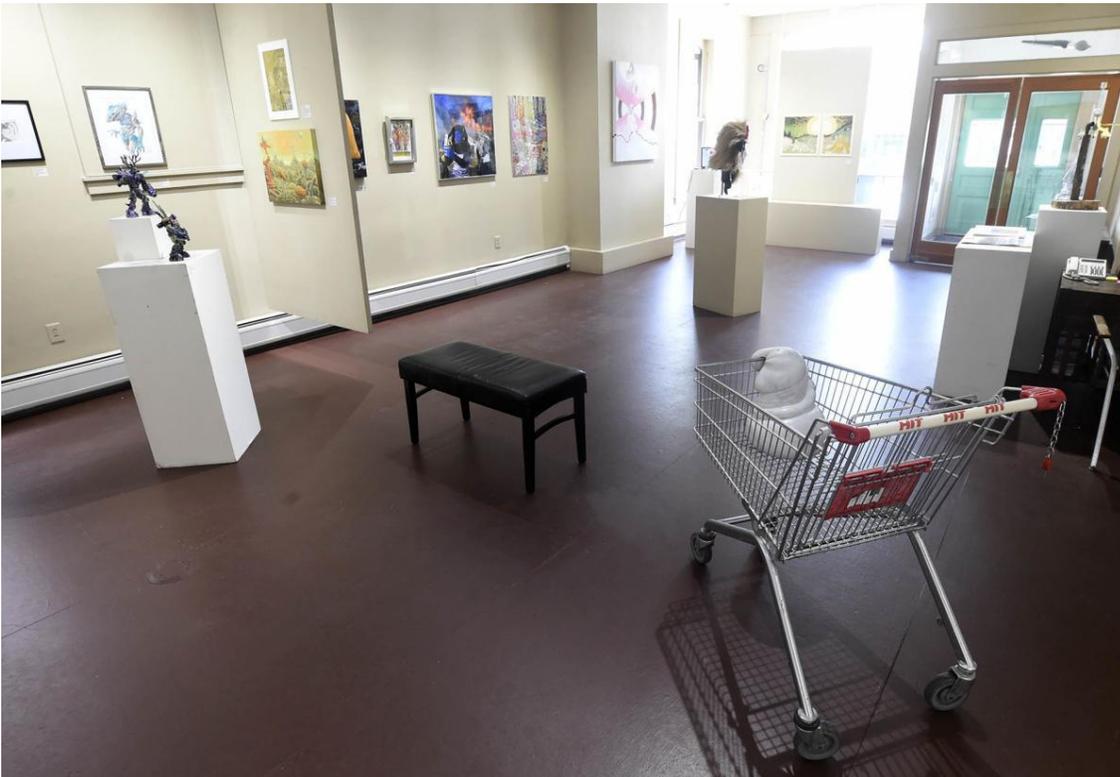
stone sculpture by Vermont artists, especially from the Barre and Rutland areas. "Celebrate," in November and December, fills the building with fine art and craft by SPA members — some 80 participated in 2019.

Public receptions celebrate the openings of SPA exhibitions, further demystifying art making and also offering opportunities for connecting artists.

"It's a great time to meet artists and talk to them about their work," Landau said, noting that she and other SPA artists sometimes do demonstrations during the openings, showing their processes and work environments.

In reopening, SPA is focused on taking a safe approach, requiring face masks, observing occupancy limits, practicing safe distancing, and frequently disinfecting. SPA will be open for public hours six days a week, and on those days also have hours available for private 30-minute visits by reservation. The plan for classes is in development with the expectation that "small batch" in person classes, outdoor options, and hybrid in person/online experiences are likely.

"This is a time when people are looking carefully at things, being quieter and more reflective, Van Fleet said. "It's a good posture to be in around art."



Studio Place Arts' main gallery exhibit "Futures" features science fiction artists imagining the future.

Photo: Jeb Wallace-Brodeur/Staff Photo

Studio Place Arts

Studio Place Arts presents "Futures," June 16-Aug. 15, science fiction artists imagine the future; Second Floor Gallery: Silent Auction; Third Floor Gallery: "The Edges and Corners of the Day," recent work by Pamela Wilson, Sarah Burns, Kimberly Hamlin and Alanna Phinney; Quick Change Gallery: "Movement, Momentum and Narrative: New Hampshire 2020 Primary," through June 27, photos by Josh Kuckens.

SPA, 201 N. Main St., Barre, 802-479-7069, www.studioplacearts.com Hours (masks required) are: 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. public hours, 2:30 to 4 p.m. private visits, Tuesday-Friday; noon to 2 p.m. public hours 2:30 to 4 p.m. private visits, Saturday; call to schedule 30 minute private visit.