

MITCHELL-GIDDINGS, BRATTLEBORO

SHOWCASING VERMONT'S ART TOWN

While singled out by Style Magazine as one of the nation's top art towns, and Smithsonian Magazine as one of the best small towns to live in for the quality and number of its arts organizations and venues, Brattleboro has never had a gallery like Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts. That is, a large commercial gallery with plenty of wall and floor space to show the kind of large-scale work favored by so many artists today.

Owners Petria Mitchell and Jim Giddings have been important mainstays of the Brattleboro art scene for years. Both painters, they were members of the Windham Art Gallery, a much loved co-operative. Giddings and Mitchell both have been intrinsic to the running of the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center – Giddings working on installations and lighting and Mitchell chairing exhibitions and doing some curating along the way, something she will be doing much more of now.

"It provides the opportunity to bring artist and collector together," Mitchell said, explaining her love of curating. "Connecting people that are passionate about sharing the mystery of creativity is the reward ... And if we can help artists to be sustainable while pursuing their creative lives, we would have achieved part of our mission."

Both said opening a gallery, first conceived as a co-operative, was a "natural progression" from their previous work. Plans changed 180 degrees when it became apparent that the co-operative model was not what the artists that they spoke to were looking for. Already tapped with making art and keeping pace with



the demands of everyday life, artists were ready to relinquish control in exchange for having Mitchell and Giddings do the foot – and hand and head – work. "They had confidence in us. They hoped this gallery would be something different, something special. And," added Mitchell, with hard-won gratification, "it is."

What does "special" look like in southern Vermont? It looks like a space devoted solely to the exhibiting and selling of fine art and craft – as much as we appreciate cafes in the region giving over their wall space to art, it is a relief not to be maneuvering around folks sipping latte. "Special"

looks like a vast amount of wall and floor space, with proportions that are conducive to showing large works of art, without being cavernous. Many new venues for showing art in New England have taken advantage of abandoned factories. These can be a great boon for some truly gargantuan works but can also be intimidating and overwhelm work that is more modest in size.

Once a recording studio under Candle in the Night, a furniture store on Main Street, the space became available a year and a half ago when Larry and Donna Simmons, owners of the store, bought the downstairs

Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts gallery.



Opening reception guests looking at Lauren Olitski, *Volatile*, acrylic, 53" x 50".

space as an investment. "It was then that we knew this was possible," said Mitchell, her eyes aglow, still not quite believing it. They bought the space from the Simmons in the summer of '13 and started construction this past February. They completely gutted the interior and reconfigured the space. The open floor plan lets visitors coming down the staircase, which has been transformed into a work of art itself, see all the way to the far wall, dispensing with any sense of claustrophobic "basement."

Some of the features I like best about the gallery are the snug smaller spaces that offset the large open area, for showing smaller work, free-standing or wall-hung. At the opening show, one of these three-sided "rooms" had colored glass bowls and vases by Josh Bernbaum whose greens and oranges played off the vivid colors of Lauren Olitski's paintings, elevating the drama of both.

The gallery currently represents seven artists who are among the most accomplished artists in the area. All were featured in October's opening show. Besides Mitchell and Giddings, both of whom are much-lauded painters who have worked in the area for more than 30 years, the current roster of Mitchell Giddings Fine Arts gallery artists are: Doug Trump

(painting and collage), Lauren Olitski (painting), Stephen Proctor (large ceramic vessels), Josh Bernbaum (glass) and Christine Triebert (photography). Two additional artists are about to join the group: wood crafter/sculptors David and Michelle Holzapfel, who are based in nearby Marlboro.

WORK FROM DIFFERENT AREAS WILL KEEP OUR GALLERY EXCITING, CURRENT AND CREATE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR ARTISTS WHILE ALSO OFFERING OUR COLLECTORS THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND THEIR COLLECTIONS AND THEIR POINT OF VIEW.

In choosing the artists who will be shown regularly, the "quality of the work was the first consideration," said Giddings, "But we didn't have to think a long time about who we wanted. We've known their work for many years." They hope to eventually represent 25 artists, and to fill the ranks they will go outside the region. The reason is "diversity," explained Mitchell. "Work from different areas will keep our gallery exciting, current and create more opportunities for artists while also offering our collectors the opportunity to expand their collections and their point of view."

Further expanding the range of work they'll show, Mitchell-Giddings Fine Art will present artists that are not in their regular "stable." To that end, half of the gallery will be used for changing solo exhibits of invited artists on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. November's invited artist is Linda Rubenstein, who creates figurative fabric sculptures and one-of-a-kind artist books.

An important aspect of her vision for the gallery, Mitchell told me, is to bring the wider community into the space. With that in mind, several of the walls are movable, adaptable for small concerts or readings. They will also outreach with a Kickstarter campaign to allow them to offer emerging artists help with framing or in other ways enable them to ready their work for exhibition.

There is a call for submissions on the website, for both represented and

visiting artists. What they are looking for, said Mitchell, is "diversity in style and media within a contemporary aesthetic that has not been available in our area previously."

Mitchell said they have already received close to 200 inquiries and submissions. Not surprising – it is no common occurrence to have a new gallery come on the scene that is so well thought out, and so beautiful a showcase for contemporary work.

| Arlene Distler

**MITCHELL-GIDDINGS
FINE ARTS**

183 MAIN STREET

**BRATTLEBORO,
VERMONT**