

Different Strokes

BY ROBIN HOWARD | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLGER OBENAU



Claudia Hartley

Things can get a little unorthodox north of Broad, and that suits Mackenzie King just fine. In fact, she and business partner Kelly Wenner Grossman are instigators. “I think people want a change,” King says with a shrug. “They want options, and that’s what we’re offering.” King and Wenner Grossman own The Art Mecca of Charleston, upper King Street’s newest art gallery. The gallery features alternative and contemporary art made exclusively by Charleston artists. People come to Charleston to shop for fine art, and we’re proud of that tradition. But locals and visitors alike appreciate alternatives to traditional art,” she says. “There’s an underserved market here.”

Business partner Wenner Grossman agrees. “There are so many outstanding contemporary artists locally,” Wenner Grossman adds. “We wanted to create a unique place where they could show their work and connect with visitors and locals who are looking for something different.”

Open since April of 2013, The Art Mecca features local artists who work in a wide range of nontraditional styles. Jim Goulah’s colorful, thought-provoking mixed-media collages are prime examples of a style of art rarely accessible in the Lowcountry. Dan Dickey’s Pollock-esque painted surfboards and recycled objects frequently stop people in their tracks. “This is what sets us apart,” King says, looking up at a paint-splashed panel. “We look for artists who make happy or thought-provoking work that you’d want to hang in your house.”

Look closely at the art and you’ll soon realize that King and Wenner Grossman are among the artists that make up the Mecca’s alternative biosphere. Wenner Grossman received her sociology degree from the University of Georgia and took metalsmithing and other jewelry

classes outside of school. Her handmade pieces are frequently seen on Charleston brides and can be found at Sasanqua Spa on Kiawah and at the Columbia Museum of Art. King received her bachelor of fine arts in metalsmithing from Kent State and went on to study with jewelry artisans in Florence, Italy, before moving to Charleston. She creates jewelry from recycled metal, then hand enamels it in bright colors. Her one-of-a-kind jewelry has won awards, including an honorable mention in the 2012 Palmetto Hands traveling show.





“As artists, we have a whole different perspective than just business owners,” King says. “There are no hidden investors here. We make the same percentage as other artists and reinvest the rest back into the business.”

It’s the third Friday of the month and The Art Mecca is hopping during the Upper King Street Shop and Stroll. Gallery manager Sarah pours wine while delighted patrons hold up smartphones to video Cheap Hats and Bourbon, a local band that is killing it with their Charlestonized version of a popular rap song. Because many collectors are already on to the fact that The Art Mecca is a steppingstone for emerging artists, art is flying off the walls. “I didn’t even know we had a gallery like this in Charleston,” says Rebecca Banet, an artist and collector recently relocated from Santa Fe, New Mexico. “This is great.” Meanwhile, the curator of a museum in Florida snaps up a painting and a found-object sculpture before heading up the street.

“It happens every day here: People discover they connect with styles of art that they didn’t even know existed,” Wenner Grossman says. In fact, the gallery can barely keep Austin Grace Smith’s wood grain painted panels in stock, and the same goes for Mike Moyer’s

mirrors made from reclaimed from local wood. Moyer's charming pieces are popular in part because he often makes a note on the back of his pieces that tell where in Charleston he found the wood. Claudia Hartley's bold, impressionist-style paintings are popular with visitors looking for a vacation memento, as are Daniella Fishburne's soulful black-and-white photographs.

As their first year in business wraps up, Wenner Grossman and King are busy getting ready for a Valentine's Day jewelry trunk show. Other plans for keeping the alternative energy going in 2014 include art forums, live art demos and featured artist meet and greets.

Freelance writer Robin Howard lives in Mount Pleasant. Visit her website: robinhowardwrites.com.