



Visitors to Artspace browse the gallery's current Biennial exhibition, which closes Dec. 13. artspacegallery.org

SPOTLIGHT

ART MOVEMENT

After 15 years in Manchester, Artspace looks for its next home

By Harry Kollatz Jr.

The Artspace Gallery's members' biennial exhibition coincides with the group's 32nd anniversary this month. The mixture of early and newer artists affiliated with the organization is coincidental with the gallery's decision to leave its Plant Zero space in Manchester at year's end.

"It's been a good run," says Dana Frostick, a 20-year member of Artspace. She's served as the gallery's board president for a few terms, is currently the treasurer and chairs the committee searching for another space. "When you think of it, we've been here 15 years, which is nearly half the history of the organization. It's been a great place for us to be, but the time's come for a change."

The artist co-op began in pre-flood-wall Shockoe. Then in 1992, the gallery climbed uphill to 6 W. Broad St., a venue that featured a high central skylight and mezzanine and was roomy enough for literary gatherings, theater, music and dance performances. There, too, is where First Fridays, under then-executive director Christina Newton, inaugurated the monthly program that assisted in connecting Richmond's various galleries and revitalizing a dormant section of downtown.

Rising rent and the building's condition spurred the 2004 migration across the river to Manchester's Plant Zero. (Some members formed Art6 and remained on Broad Street for several years.) Artspace arrived in the former cigarette packaging plant ahead of

a development frenzy. Then came a wearying attrition of otherwise satisfying circumstances.

During Artspace's presence at Plant Zero, the gallery created the Radius 250 biennial, a curated invitation to artists working around Richmond, and the Think Small biennial, which brought together numerous artists presenting gift-sized work during the holiday season. Artspace continued to incorporate performances, readings and other public events into its programming.

Besides the big, open industrial space at Plant Zero and the opportunity for flexible design — and skylights, too — a unique draw involved a solution for that enduring Richmond bugaboo: parking. Patrons pulled into an expansive lot for free. Plant Zero entered into a period of catalytic dynamism, with studios and arts-related activities, an event space and a cafe. Art Works, already next door — formed from the breakup of Shockoe Bottom Arts Center — bought its venue and brought visitors.

Then the free parking turned to paid, and Plant Zero spaces began turning

into non-art-specific enterprises. Gallery leadership opened their discussion of an exit strategy. During the most recent lease negotiation, Artspace received permission to break its lease with six months' notice.

Frostick's committee embarked on the mission to find a new home a year ago. Locating an accessible venue that meets the varied requirements of the gallery is proving to be a challenge. Artspace is meanwhile setting up temporary offices at The Collaboratory of Virginia, which is geared toward non-profit organizations. Frostick explains, "We can continue to meet clients who may want to purchase work and with artists or potential exhibitors. It's a space to call home while we finalize our search."

The hunt received a boost through a \$10,000 matching grant, given by an anonymous benefactor, which Artspace is working to equal by year's end. Those funds are earmarked for fitting out the gallery's new location.

More than a new physical gallery, Frostick details, Artspace's goal is to increase the diversity of both its membership and its exhibitions through outreach and curatorial decisions.

Ian Glass is in the second half of a two-year term as gallery president — and at an important juncture.

The pandemic hit at the beginning of the exhibition season and Artspace's annual auction. "We held a number of shows online, others in person," Glass says. Several artists deferred their shows until in-person visiting is possible.

"We'd been having these discussions about moving for a long time," he says. "None of the members wanted to close up. This is about going forward." ■

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