

coffee shop curators

by lilly mcrea



Guitar Guy by Luran Minco, a Gulu-Gulu alum who currently teaches illustration at both Montserrat College of Art and The Rhode Island School of Design, laurenminco.com

From the hair salon on Front Street to the coffee shop next door, downtown business owners sideline as curators. In this issue we have highlighted three local business owners who have taken art exhibition into their own hands.

Modeled after the Prague namesake where Steve Feldmann first met his wife Marie in the spring of 1995, Gulu-Gulu is a mythic hybrid. Situated at the crossroads of downtown, it's part breakfast joint, coffee bar, wine bar, screening room, hugely popular music venue and gallery space. When pressed for a definition, Feldmann says, 'We just are.'

Gulu got its start in Lynn right across from Raw Art Works, the youth art center that produces talented painters now exhibiting at the café. Since its opening in Salem three years ago, the Gulu is now a full-service gallery. For a commission, the café offers two artists per month inclusion in Gulu's online gallery and newsletter, an opening with a band and processing of the sales and pick up.

A classic coffee shop and sandwich spot, Front Street Coffee is a longtime local favorite for strong coffee and made-to-order sandwiches. The café has featured art since its opening over a decade ago, which means over the years it has given over a hundred novice artists a chance to get seen; a wonderful twist of fate, since Chris Silva almost went with another theme.

"I almost chose antique car memorabilia. My dad was into collecting it. But doing the art was organic...There were artists that wanted to hang and Artist Row didn't exist."

In a Pig's Eye owners Jennifer and Johnny Reardon took over the Derby Street bar and restaurant after it was shut down in the 80s. They renovated and needed to put something on the bar's red brick walls. Conveniently, a relative and renowned maritime artist Racket Shreve offered up his paintings and a tradition was born. With their spot also a live music hub, the Reardons are ongoing supporters of the arts and local community. The two passions merged when the Pig featured artwork from Northeast Arc, a support center for people with disabilities.

Vision & Process

Like the owner of the Pig, Feldmann likes hanging art because it emphasizes the Gulu's focus on the local community. Raised on comics, he has a penchant for the whimsical and strange, but he has shown everything from colorful abstract expressionism to bold realism. Because the space is wide and open, he often selects larger works. But he keeps an open mind. He states frankly that painters of lighthouses or seagulls need not apply and photographers should also look elsewhere. Painters should contact Feldmann through gulu-gulu.com.

The Front Street February show featured the boundary-pushing art of Mike Lash. Dark valentines filled the coffee shop with the artist's lost loves, their bare female bodies and hearts pierced with arrows, accompanying statements like "You hardly make me throw up at all."

They are a testament to Chris Silva's stance that art should make you think. "I don't consider myself judge and jury of the work. I just look to see that they are serious about their art," he says. "For example, if someone brings something in a sketchbook, I'll suggest they work on presentation. They don't need to frame it, but it has to look thoughtful."

In line with his egalitarian attitude, Silva's job stops at helping to hang the art. There is no commission here. Some choose to have openings, others don't. Like Gulu's lighthouse ban, Halloween art doesn't always fly at Front Street. "We get a lot of Halloween art submissions, but only one October," says Silva.

This is an intimate space and collections of smaller images and sculptures hang well in the back, where local business people line up to get a sandwich. Those interested in hanging at Front Street should see Silva with a nicely prepared portfolio. The shop hosts anywhere from one to three artists a month.

The Pig, already decorated with its charming pig bric-a-brac, looks for continuity and professionalism. Jenny Reardon says that the work must be framed or on canvas. "One woman used all IKEA frames. They were inexpensive but looked polished." She likens the Pig to art school. "We see it as a place for new artists to get their feet wet and learn about the business end of things -- hanging, framing, pricing, labeling, writing a bio, getting in touch with a newspaper. It's like Artist 101."

The Pig charges a small commission and organizes an opening reception. The paintings hang longer here too, which gives them a bit more face time with dinner-goers. Like Silva, Reardon finds her artists through word-of-mouth or face-to-face with a portfolio in hand.

No nudes while I'm eating my toast

So what are some of the limitations to hanging one's work at a local restaurant or café? "Nudity seems to be a sticking point for some. It's odd. Even a 1960's style cartoon mermaid can elicit a negative response," says Feldmann.

"We are a restaurant first, so we can't do nudes or anything sexually suggestive," agrees Reardon. That said, she is unafraid to offer up abstract art. Many of her customers are inspired while others just scratch their heads.

If nudes hanging over a ham on rye are too much for the public, it hasn't stopped these curators from hosting some truly challenging and surprising shows. Silva says,



Jenny Goes Pop by Edsy Burgess depicts Jenny Reardon of the Pig's Eye, solvent transfer with colored pencil, 15 x 20 in. edsyart.com

"Well, Michael Blier of Landworks Studio did a live plant installation. It was pretty wild. He installed sea grass, dried bamboo, and tall marsh grass. Brent Clarke's documentary photos also got a reaction, especially an image with a swastika."

But can you make money this way?

Mike Lash, who has exhibited all over the world, is highly collectible. Though his unframed works at Front Street Coffeehouse this winter did not rake in huge sums, his paintings have been said to go for \$30,000.

As for a formula for what sells, Feldmann shrugs, "It is really hard to tell what will sell." Reardon says she encourages the artist to consider the price point and the time of year. Christmas is a good time to hang. Silva also cites affordability as playing a role in sales.

There are quite a few artists who have made it since showing at these venues. Feldmann points to Bren Bataclan, an unemployed software engineer in 2003, who started leaving his artwork on benches with a sign: "You can take this home if you promise to smile at the next person you see."

"Talk about upstart," says Feldmann. "From there, Bren has begun to sell his work internationally and his shows at Gulu sell out."