



Council President Pro Tem
Barbara Bry
Council District 1



Dear Neighbors,

I once read that art is “the repository of a society’s collective memory.” It preserves something beyond the facts and historical account. Art awakens all of our senses to fully appreciate how it felt to exist at a specific place and time, regardless of our own limitations.

Art is vital to every community. Sadly, the pandemic has slowed walk-in art gallery business to a crawl here in San Diego. Could this be the death knell to the dreams of some local gallery owners?

In this week’s newsletter, we discuss the uncertain future with three La Jolla gallery owners who have contributed a great deal to the community’s vibrant art scene.

Barbara Bry

Council President Pro Tem

If you own a D1 small business and have a pandemic story you would like to share with the community, please e-mail BarbaraBry@sandiego.gov.

Her art’s in the right place

Name: Fresh Paint Gallery

Location: 1020-B Prospect St., Suite 102, La Jolla

Phone: (858) 215 2501

Website: www.freshpaintgallery.com

Hours: 10 a.m.- 6 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday, 12 p.m.-8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday

Owner: Deborah Williams

The space, the light and the location — the ground floor of the Muse luxury condo complex halfway between downtown and La Jolla Cove — seemed perfect. This was where Deborah Williams would launch her dream.

Eighteen months later, Fresh Paint Gallery is turning into her nightmare.

"I knew I was going to lose money for the first year or so, but I didn't think it was going to be this bad," Williams said.

Quite cruelly, Fresh Paint had begun to gain a footing in the La Jolla art community just as COVID-19 hit. Its first wave of customers had returned to buy additional pieces. New artists were booked months in advance. (Fresh Paint's space is dedicated to eight-week shows by emerging painters. Until November 29, the encaustic work of San Diego's Linda Frueh is on display.)

But this summer, after the gallery reopened from an almost three-month closure, walk-in business was down 75 percent from the year before.

"I used to have a lot of traffic from the hotels on either side of us and people dining out in La Jolla," Williams said. "Now, I'll get five people a day instead of 25."

In addition to the tourists, Fresh Paint also lost many of its local clients.

"They're generally older people who tell me they don't go to art galleries anymore," Williams said.

Originally from Maine, Williams worked in art galleries while attending Bucknell University. She began collecting and curating emerging artists while living with her husband, then a Qualcomm executive, in India.

"I just love this," she said. "It's what I love to do. I love putting together a show and promoting artists."

Williams said she hasn't asked for a rent reduction from her landlord, nor has she applied for any government relief.

"I didn't think I qualified for it, but maybe I should look a little more closely into that," she said. "And, of course, everybody kind of thought that it was not going to be as long or as bad as this."

Some hard choices lie ahead.

"This was kind of a lifelong dream, but it's not going anywhere," Williams said. "Do I hang in there and keep putting more of my own money into it in the hopes that it will turn around and people will start coming back, or do I cut my losses and get out?"



Fresh Paint Gallery owner Deborah Williams poses in front of pieces from her gallery's current show, by emerging artist Linda Frueh.

'Something good always happens'

Name: K. Nathan Gallery

Location: 7723 Fay Ave., La Jolla

Phone: (858) 459-3490

Hours: By appointment only

Website: www.knathangallery.com

Owner: Keith Kelman



Keith Kelman poses with paintings from the Bay Area Figurative Movement for sale in his gallery, K. Nathan.

Business is down 30 percent for Keith Kelman's La Jolla art gallery, but he's not losing any sleep yet.

"I think I'm doing fine even though we're losing money every month," he said.

Kelman opened his 1,000-square-foot gallery in 1992, lending it his middle name (Nathan). He entered the art world via rare-coin dealing in the 1970s and specializes in paintings of the Early California movement.

"I'm a treasure-hunter, just like with coins," he said. "It's exciting to buy something for \$20,000 dollars and sell it for \$30,000, just based on my knowledge."

Kelman said he views between 200 and 1,000 paintings a day — online and at estate sales and auctions — and has an email list of 60,000 clients eager to read about his latest acquisitions.

Though he was turned down by the city for a small-business grant, Kelman received a small Paycheck Protection Program loan (he is his only employee) from the Small Business Administration, as well as a \$100,000 loan through its Economic Injury Disaster Loan program.

"They told me they'd give it to me at 3.5 percent," Kelman recalled. "At first, I wondered whether I should do it. Then I thought, hey, if I can't make 3.5 percent a year on \$100,000, then I shouldn't be in business."

Because he enjoys a good relationship with his landlord, Kelman said, he hasn't asked for a break on rent.

"He just repainted the whole building and paid for half of a new awning," he said. "I'm happy here, so we're just trying to get through this. It's even been kind of good in some ways."

Kelman said he used his gallery's nine-month closure to grow his framing business, which he owns with a partner, and shift the focus of his gallery's sales from 95 percent walk-in to 95 online purchases.

"Luckily, I redid the website a couple of years ago," he said.

Kelman acknowledged that he can't continue losing money forever, but said that he's optimistic.

"This stuff is great art, and somebody will come out of the woodwork and buy something," he said. "Something good always happens."

Oil in the family

Name: K. Nathan Gallery

Location: 7723 Fay Ave., La Jolla

Phone: (858) 459-3490

Hours: By appointment only

Website: www.knathangallery.com

Owner: Keith Kelman

Tasende Gallery appears to be in no existential danger whatsoever from COVID-19. Its namesake family — gallery owner/president Jose Tasende and his children, associate gallery director Betina Tasende and gallery manager Altor Tasende — are fortunate enough to own the building that they do business in. (Jose, a former jai alai player who opened his first art gallery in Mexico, had the La Jolla structure built in 1978, taking the worry of making rent forever out of the picture.)

In addition, Tasende Gallery has very little walk-in traffic to lose to COVID-19.

"We love La Jolla," Betina said. "We live here. But our clientele does not usually come from here. If they walk in, it's usually because they're visiting from somewhere else."

Betina said that gallery revenue is down "a little bit" from where it should be but said she can't place a percentage on it.

"We sell large-ticket items, so if one sells, we're OK for a bit," she said. (The gallery's current show, "Petite Format: Works on Paper and Sculpture," lists available pieces priced from \$4,000 to \$200,000.)

When it closed for the first two months of the pandemic, Tasende applied for and received small loans from the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loan programs.

That helped make up for the lost revenue, Betina said. However, the business model of an art gallery is taking hits — not just from COVID-19 but competition from art fairs and the internet — and "we still have to figure out what we're going to do in the long term."

For the first time, Tasende is staging virtual shows.

"I think if you're an art gallery and you manage to keep your doors open and keep busy on the internet, you're going to be OK ultimately," Betina said.



Tasende Gallery associate director Betina Tasende and director Mary Beth Peterson bookend artist Armando Romero's Grand Pierrot statue, newly masked for COVID-19, on the gallery's outdoor deck.