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Artists Bring Life to Local Shopping Centers

By Sophie Braccini



Art behind empty storefronts at Rheem Shopping Center in Moraga Photo Wenda Pyman

one end of the shopping center to the other and can only be beneficial to the small businesses located between the anchors."

The displays will change every eight to ten weeks and continue until the spaces are leased. Kimco Realty Corporation, the owner of the Center, does not charge the gallery for displaying the art in empty stores.

Theater Square in Orinda has a reputation as being a challenging place for the businesses located in the back portion of the center. But that didn't stop Allison McCrady from taking over a previous art gallery to displaying her work and the creations of some 20 artists. "It all happened organically," explains McCrady, "I have been an Orinda artist for ten years. At the beginning of 2008 the city asked me for a painting representing the city for a poster. The firm managing Theater Square invited me to display the original in their space, and I agreed. Other artists proposed to join in and I supervised the extension of the project."

In fact the scheme grew so well that McCrady now has two spaces in the Square, one of them being a framing studio she owns with a partner. "When I started to represent artists and opened the store 1 1/2 years ago, the recession just started, I really questioned my decision, knowing that art is not considered a first necessity item." But McCrady is as much a businesswoman as she is an artist. Before turning to art 10 years ago, she was an investment banker and she believes that the business savvy she developed then is what makes her succeed now. "To succeed in any community you have to understand it well and adapt to its demands," she says, "when I started in the middle of a recession, I decided to cut my prices and let my customers know it. My main goal is to allow people to enjoy art everyday, whether it's by coming to the gallery, or buying something that will make people feel good and fit their budget." She believes that this adaptability is one of the elements that have made her successful where others have failed.

"This location has been very good for me," adds McCrady, "the place is beautiful, people enjoy seeing the art, and the company that manages the Square has been very supportive; they want the community to visit the Square and the community is coming."

The Lamorinda Art Association Open Studio on October 17 and 18 is another way that artists in the three cities will enliven the community. The event will kick off at the Moraga Gallery, and McCrady's boutique will be part of the tour. For more information go to: www.laaopenstudios2009.blogspot.com.

In two Lamorinda shopping centers, the Rheem Center in Moraga and Theater Square in Orinda, artists are creating new life and attracting the community to areas that had been a bit desolated. It just took an artistic vision and some sound business sense.

Somber windows adorned with colorful artistic creations enliven the Moraga Rheem shopping center. Artists are hanging a show in the windows of empty storefronts adjoining the Moraga Art Gallery at 570 Center Street. "It's a great partnership for the artists and the Center as it helps promote the gallery while filling the ugly, empty spaces," says Wenda Pyman of the Moraga Art Gallery. "It already has made a difference ... as we were working (setting up the show in August), passersby frequently stopped to look at the art and applaud our efforts," she adds, "the works cheer up the area and lifts the spirits of the viewers."

Artist Nancy Slack noted the difference as well. "Some people told me that they had never noticed the gallery before," she said, "it encourages shoppers to walk from

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