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Lamorinda Artists Lose Marketing Outlet as Lafayette Gallery Closes

By Nick Marnell



Gallery owner Judy Miller displays her art.
Photo Nick Marnell
Mt. Diablo Blvd. as the beginning of the end.

The Lafayette Art Gallery quietly closed its doors March 31, a casualty of hasty decision making, bad timing and the 21st-century disruption of legacy businesses. But atop the list of reasons for its downfall sat a Lamorinda inevitability: the 17-year Lafayette fixture could no longer afford the rent.

The gallery, a cooperative of up to 28 artists, was founded by Judy Miller in April 1999. She sat alone at her desk, not a customer in sight, as she reflected on what went wrong.

"The selling of art has changed," Miller said. She waxed philosophically about the damage done to artists by the Internet, especially to sculptors like her. "People miss the feeling, the touching, the handling of a piece of art, by purchasing online."

Miller identified the 2013 gallery relocation to 3420

"The new spot was not known as a place to buy paintings," said Geoffrey Meredith, a member artist. "The shop was more for ceramics and jewelry. You can't sell enough jewelry to pay the rent."

"It might have taken years for this to become a destination spot," added Susan Erickson, one of the original member artists.

Miller agreed that the gallery location was an impediment, acknowledging that if she could have done it over, the gallery would have remained at its previous location, across from Chow Restaurant.

"I wanted to stay," she said. "But we weren't sure what was happening. The landlord took down our sculpture garden with only two weeks' notice. What would happen next? Did the plans include us? We voted to move. As it turns out, we could have still been there."

Instead, the gallery struggled from the outset at its new location, contending with the boulevard construction and the rebuild of Bonehead's Texas BBQ next door.

"We were having a tough time making it," Meredith said. "There was no money for advertising. Press releases can only go so far."

It became a dysfunctional way to run a business, Miller said. "One artist leaves, a new one comes in because they can't afford to stay. We were struggling to pay the bills."

"They asked to lower the rent by half, but I couldn't do that," said Dave Roberson, managing partner of The Forge, the gallery landlord. "I couldn't support their business. But I offered to let them draw down on their deposit. They gave me a 60-day notice in February."

"I hated to see them go," he said.

According to Miller, two members will take over management of the Diablo Fine Arts Gallery in Walnut Creek, providing a new outlet for the co-op artists to feature their work. Roberson said that potential tenants for the gallery space include a cafe and a menswear retailer.

"It's a big loss for everybody," Miller said.



Reach the reporter at: nick@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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