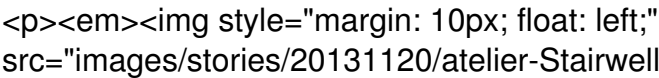


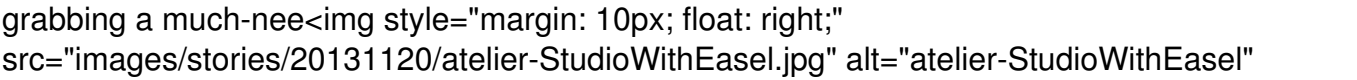
A Creative Collaboration

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor
Tuesday, 19 November 2013 13:37

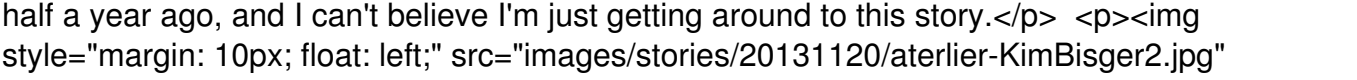
Hidden in plain sight on the second story of the old Lipsitz building, the tenants of Atelier on Bay are sharing space, making art, and having a ball.

The first time I prepared to enter Atelier on Bay, it was raining so hard I couldn't read the name on their sign from my office stoop across the street. I remember huddling under the awning with my husband and daughter, debating whether to wait it out or make a run for it.

Eventually, as the blinding deluge continued with no end in sight, we pulled our jackets up over our heads and dashed across Bay Street like puddle-hopping maniacs. Through the door and up the stairs we bounded, tumbling into Atelier's Grand Opening reception with all the elegance and sophistication of a puppy in a bathtub.

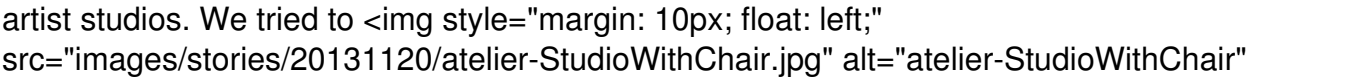
Soggy and flustered, I recall handing my wet jacket to some kind soul, grabbing a much-needed glass of wine, then wandering off on my own into . . . well, pure enchantment. It felt like a maze. A kaleidoscopic dream. A meandering series of bright, mysterious spaces with no beginning or end. You'd leave one, only to stumble into another, then another. You'd get a little lost, but it really didn't matter. Where ever you were was an astonishing place to be. It was a little like falling down Alice's rabbit hole. Only it was up, not down.

Eventually, I found my family again ♦ not that I was looking ♦ and we met the artists, made nice with the party guests, nibbled on some food, headed home. But I never forgot that first dreamlike ramble through the second-story wonderland that is Atelier on Bay. It was half a year ago, and I can't believe I'm just getting around to this story.

Atelier on Bay is the brainchild of Spring Island residents Kimberly and Jeffrey Bisger who recently renovated the historic Lipsitz Department Store, built in 1883. They'd first toyed with the idea of putting luxury apartments on the second floor, but this plan quickly became unfeasible. Enter Plan B.

"My painting studio had taken over our guest house," Kimberly tells me. "Since we had all this empty space on the second floor of the building, Jeffrey suggested that we install AC and electrical and I could just use the space as a studio. I already knew (artist) Mary Segars, and knew that she loved the space. We originally were going to only finish the first section of the building ♦ five studios ♦ but within two weeks all 14 studios were full by word of mouth."

The Bisgers, who moved here from Richmond, VA, had seen a similar concept there ♦ a studio/gallery for multiple artists ♦ called ArtWorks, as well as one in Alexandria, VA, called the Torpedo Factory. They thought it just might work here in a vibrant arts town like Beaufort, in a great old building like Lipsitz.

"The natural light and existing wall configuration were perfect for working artist studios. We tried to change as little as possible to keep the building's historic nature," says Kimberly.

The Atelier artists rent their studios. They can hang their work in their own studio spaces, as well as in the hallways and galleries that divide the studios. Each artist works one day a week as gallery greeter and sales clerk, and they rotate Saturdays. The artists do not pay commissions to Atelier, so everyone is their own business owner. Several of the artists offer classes in the gallery spaces.

When you climb the stairs to Atelier on any given day, you'll find an eclectic mix of artists at work in 

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src="images/stories/20131120/atelier-Sweatshop.jpg" alt="atelier-Sweatshop" width="262" height="220" />their studios . . . watercolorists and oil painters, "altered book" makers and jewelry designers. We bombed in unannounced on longtime local jewelry maker Juli Mills, who now sells her work to over 70 stores around the country and employs several helpers at her Atelier studio. "Welcome to my sweat shop," she jokes, and we spend some time chatting with the collegial group, all of whom seem to be having way too much fun for people at work. They're getting ready for an upcoming show at Lulu Burgess, and the energy is palpable.</p> <p>"The camaraderie is my favorite thing about Atelier," says Juli. "Being able to feed off of other people is just great. I worked from home before, so this is a big change. But it's a good change."</p> <p>Painter Sue McCarthy concurs. "Usually, as an artist, you work alone. Having all the other artists around you ♦ all these like-minded people ♦ is inspiring. It's just a wonderful environment. And after working from home, I find it a lot less distracting, too. I can't get up from a painting and go to my computer, or do the wash, or whatever. Here, I can stay focused."</p> <p>I ask Sue what kind of foot traffic they get on a typical day, here at the bustling corner of Bay and West. She tells me they get enough, but more importantly, it's the right kind. "You're not just getting everybody who walks up and down Bay Street ♦ lots of them don't even know we're here ♦ but if they're seriously looking for art, they've probably heard about us. It's probably a little daunting for some people; you have to come upstairs. And it's not your typical 'shopping.' It's a real experience to come through here, though. Everything's wide open, nothing's closed. People can walk into any studio, whether there's somebody there or not."</p> <p>Moving through the building, we find Mary Thibault hard at work in her studio, where she's displaying a new portrait of her good friend, actor Tom Berenger, along with her design for last summer's Water Festival tee-shirt. ("I've got two of those under my belt, now," she says, smiling.) Mary agrees with Sue McCarthy that escaping distractions is a big part of Atelier's appeal. "I get so much more done here, because I'm not at home in my studio, where I have dishes and laundry . . . Being here with the other artists, with all that creativity . . . it just stirs my own!"</p> <p>Mary takes me next door to Mary Jane Martin's studio ♦ Mary Jane's not here this morning ♦ and fills me in on her latest exhibit, along with the two pieces she's currently working on for Beaufort Memorial Hospital. Mary Thibaut might as well be talking about her own work, she's so excited. The famous Atelier "artistic camaraderie" is on full display, not to mention a refreshing absence of competitiveness.</p> <p>On the way out, we run into painter/sculptor Steve Weeks, currently the only male among the Atelier artists. We're assured this dearth of testosterone was not intentional, and that there are plenty of men on the waiting list. (By the way, the waiting list is 30 artists long; it might as well be 300, because nobody seems interested in leaving.) Steve is known around Atelier as "Superman," a reference to his role as Superintendent of the studio/gallery. ("That just means I fix everything that breaks," says Steve, with a good-natured grin.)</p> <p>"Every artist has a role that contributes to the success of the studio/gallery," says Kimberly Bisger. "Mary Segars is our general manager. We have a marketing team, a special events team, a scheduling person, a superintendent . . . Everyone contributes."</p> <p>And that is the secret to Atelier on Bay. Everyone contributes. You feel it the minute you walk through the door ♦ the warmth, the friendship, the spirit of creativity and collaboration. Today, the artists are working on their group contribution to the Friends of Caroline Hospice Festival of Trees. Their tree will be decorated

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with tiny paintings. They're also working on larger "small" paintings for their upcoming holiday show "Good Things Come in Small Packages," which will feature works no bigger than 12 inches by 12 inches. **The show opens Thursday, November 21, with a reception from 5 ♦ 7 pm**. We encourage anyone who loves art ♦ and artists ♦ to come out that evening, climb the stairs, and get lost in the magic of Atelier on Bay.

The artists of Atelier on Bay include: Mary Segars, Mary Jane Martin, Pam Hagan, Steve Weeks, Julia Mills, Kimberly Bisger, Arla Crumlich Wible, Pat Schad, Donna Varner, Arlene Peck, Sue McCarthy, Lynn Brown, Mary Thibault, Carol Henry. The gallery/studio is located in the historic Lipsitz Department Store building at 203 West Street in Beaufort. Hours are 11 ♦ 5 pm, Monday ♦ Saturday. For more information, visit www.atelieronbay.com

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