

Easton gallery invites the world in with art for all

By Geoff Gehman

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Ron Morris and Ken Jones Jr. like to build nests. The couple's new gallery in Easton is a tiny, lofty salon five blocks from their house. A wide range of works by a wide range of artists at a wide range of prices -- \$7,000 to \$500 to \$0 -- invites visitors to take home a piece of art with the mission statement that art doesn't have to be expensive to be priceless.

In fact, the first object in the first show at Ken Jones Jr. Fine Art is a free print. Made by Jones, the floral view of fireworks is intended to lure visitors to the gallery, which could be easily missed on the boarded-up, slowly blossoming 500 block of Northampton Street. One of four prints of fireworks, each in a 25-image edition, it's an incentive for folks to return again and again, at least to collect the whole series.

"We want this space to be open to everyone, to work at all levels," says Jones, who with Morris moved from Brooklyn to Easton in 2006. "We're all about growing and nurturing. We like it when things leave the nest."

Jones and Morris opened their den two weeks ago in an 18th-century building, a former linen store and boarding house recently restored to expose a facade of brick on the third floor and stone on the second floor. At 500 square feet it's about as big as the couple's former apartment in Park Slope. It's slightly bigger than the carriage house behind their three-story home, a Colonial Revival/Victorian/Eastlake/Bedouin Tent mongrel.

Their first show is stocked with small pieces with oversized personalities. Dan Walker's "Land of the Lost" series combines found plastic objects and screws painted industrial-jungle green. Wendy Edwards' "Circus" is a wheel of carnival-colored ribbons of paint. There's a pop crunch to Erika Koop's elegantly garish silkscreens of American food favorites, including a sprinkled doughnut that masquerades as a tassled hassock.

All the artists are members of Jones' extended family. He discovered Koop in a senior-thesis exhibit at Muhlenberg College, where he once helped costume summer musicals. He met Bruce Stiglich, who paints vibrant landscapes on wooden blocks, nine years ago at a brand-design think tank run by mogul Les Wexner, who turned Victoria's Secret and Abercrombie & Fitch into pop-culture phenomena.

This eclectic bunch reflects an eclectic couple. Morris, a 34-year-old native of Jacksonville, Fla., is a singer-songwriter who created plays across the country with the renowned Missoula (Mont.) Children's Theatre and taught music and math at a junior high school in Manhattan. Jones, a 28-year-old native of White Oak, Texas, is an art consultant who in 2001-2004 helped decorate home-furnishings ads and stores for Polo Ralph Lauren. He once picked giant photographs of wild mustangs to coordinate with smoky quartz crystals chosen by Lauren to anchor a lifestyle collection called Coldwater Canyon.

"Polo University" rigorously prepared Jones for his current career as an art adviser for individuals and corporations. Many of his clients are extremely wealthy: hedge-fund managers, real-estate developers, a race-car driver. They hire him to deal squarely with dealers; locate works by, say, Jewish women born after 1960; refine and define their taste.

“There’s a sort of soothsayer quality to my job,” says Jones, who recently sold a painting by Julia Schwadron, one of his gallery clients, to actor Parker Posey, one of his consultees. “They can’t tell me exactly what they don’t want, but they can tell me what they don’t like very quickly.”

Jones typically gives clients 20 suggestions for a wall. His curatorial arrangements shoot the sky, too. He recreated the feeling of watching fireworks on a Brooklyn rooftop in the show’s first three images: his own fireworks print, Susan Hamburger’s ink skyline of used paper coffee cups and Morris’ ink drawing of a bird’s nest. He chose Justin Richel’s “Fountain” not just because it’s a wickedly whimsical gouache of precariously stacked desserts, pouring teacups and Colonial furniture. Those chairs and tables, he points out, could have been made when the gallery building opened.

One could blame Jones’ rabid attention to detail on his training with Polo, where everyone scurries to create lifestyles around Lauren’s sudden love for this blanket or that shell. There was the time, for example, when Jones bought a framed collection of 19th-century butterflies with open wings. Then he purchased more than 800 period closed-wing butterflies to simulate the assortment for stores. Then he opened the wings of every vintage specimen in a high-humidity “relaxing” chamber. It was the fetish, he says with a laugh, of “an anal Virgo.”

Yet Jones’ gallery is more homey than fussy. He and Morris sell \$10 cakes made of Crayola crayons and \$10-\$50 ceramic pets – mouse, snail, raccoon – suitable for garden ornaments or doorstops. The animals debuted in a YouTube video for Morris’ song “Boyfriend,” shot around a cedar-shingled house on Easton’s South Side and art directed by Jones.

Made in Easton, the brightly painted critters are gallery pets and community mascots. They represent the couple’s fondness for their adopted city’s diversity – geographic, architectural, ethnic. “The energy here is just infectious,” says Morris. “There’s an electricity that we’re glad to be plugging into.”

Morris and Jones plan to keep building their nest. They expect to open shows every two months. Future exhibits will include abstractions of Hudson River Valley views and drawings made with tattoo needles. Prices will remain affordable, with a ceiling of \$10,000.

One of the gallery’s new patrons is Jones’ mother, who recently purchased her first work from her son. She bought a \$300 Stiglich landscape because it’s an inexpensive portrait of a priceless place: the front porch where Jones and Morris fell in love and married.

“Movin’ On Up!” through Aug. 31, Ken Jones Jr. Fine Art gallery, 526 Northampton St., Easton (a block west of the State Theatre). Hours: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Thurs.-Sun., by appointment. 917-821-7372, <http://www.kenjonesjr.com>.

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