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Art and Film Meet at Bantam Cinema

By: Nancy Barnes

Stroll down what is termed the grand hall inside the Bantam Cinema and clear evidence of a new collaboration will catch your eye. In partnership with the cinema, the Litchfield-based New Arts Gallery is displaying artwork there, with talks by artists and others at the cinema in the offing.

First up is a series of works by Washington Depot artist Nancy Lasar. Her dense but lyrical imagery, grounded in her observations from nature, exudes a sensibility that has been compared with that of the 20th-century giant Ashille Gorky.

"It's actually an interesting space. The long wall that's there—we have to be very selective in what we show there," said New Arts Gallery owner Tony Carretta of the dark teal corridor where the works by Ms. Lasar hang. "They did bring in some new lights for the area. We did make some minor changes. The space will be refined as time goes on. It's still a nice venue for showing moderately scaled pieces. There's an intimacy to it that's not always had in the gallery. It has its own advantages as well. In any space you can do interesting, appropriate shows."

"You have to look close, and there's a lot of art that needs to be looked at closely as well as at a distance," said Ms. Lasar of the cinema space. She said it could take her as long as a year to finish one of her graphite drawings, which bear titles such as "Snap Dragon Diptych" and "Awakenings." "I definitely work from nature and from my memory of nature."

Of comparisons that have been made of her work with that of Mr. Gorky, Ms. Lasar said, "He was an artist that worked with linear forms and graphite, and that certainly is an area I've explored for many years. He's one of my favorite artists. I'm deeply concerned with developing deep space. Certainly, the [Litchfield County modernist] artist Charles Cajori has been a great influence."

"The [Bantam Cinema] is very important to artists. It's a great release to be able to go to the cinema. There isn't an artist that I know who wouldn't be supportive of that endeavor," she said of the new collaboration.

"The opportunity just arose, and so we found the smallest works that are appropriate," she continued, agreeing with Mr. Carretta that the new cinema space possesses intimacy.

Her exhibition at the gallery, she said, contains even smaller works than the works on display at the cinema.

Mr. Carretta, whose stable of contemporary artists is international in scope and whose gallery, housed in a two-story barn in the Milton section of Litchfield, is celebrating its 10th year, said he was approached by the cinema's new owners—Sidney Koch and his son David and Litchfield resident Elizabeth Merz—roughly one month ago about a collaboration.

"The relationship between what they do and what we do—they show progressive, more cutting-edge films, so it's a similar market," said Mr. Carretta. "Our exhibits are in the same vein, exploring ... doing adventurous things."

"The shows [at the cinema] are running concurrently with ours here, so it's a smaller scale preview of what's going on here," Mr.

Carretta explained of the synergy between the gallery and the cinema.

Because the artists Mr. Carretta is exhibiting at his gallery will also exhibit at the cinema, the next artist slated for the grand hall is ceramicist Elizabeth MacDonald, who uses fragments to create grids, with a selection of luminous, highly charged works on paper by Pamela Stockamore scheduled to go on display after that. An exhibition of works by Italian artists, among them the still, classically restrained landscapes by photographer Andrea Rontini, is on tap to follow.

"There'll probably be 10 exhibits, so people will get to know there's another show coming," said Mr. Carretta. "We've curated some shows outside the gallery—we actually have a show at the Forman School right now—[but] we haven't curated a series of shows. We saw this as a symbiotic relationship. We thought this was a good joining. A lot of people who come to our shows go to the theater. It's the same crowd in the end."

Presently in development is a series of talks, either by the exhibiting artists or others connected with the art world, in one of the theater's cinemas.

"The presentations will be an exchange between the artists and the people who come," Mr. Carretta said. "It's basically to give insight into the processes of different artists. It's kind of an opportunity to see further what the art is about. We'll take advantage of the video aspect by doing presentations on the screen. We'll also probably bring in some speakers to talk about the art, as appropriate. That will develop as that goes on." He noted that the first speaker would most likely be Ms. MacDonald.

Mr. Carretta said it was his understanding that the Bantam Cinema, which has shown films since 1927, had exhibited art at one point in its long life as the oldest, continuously operating cinema in the state—a fact that new owner Sidney Koch confirmed.

"We were honored to be asked to do this," Mr. Koch had said of the cinema's purchase from Lisa Hedley, whose ownership of what is considered a cultural treasure came to an end in January. Ms. Hedley serves as president and creative director of the Mayflower Spa. Ms. Hedley's father, Robert Mnuchin, a former Goldman Sachs managing partner, opened C&M Arts, a New York gallery

specializing in 20th and 21st century master artworks, in the early 1990s, the same year he and his wife Adriana purchased the Mayflower Inn. In 2005, Mr. Mnuchin merged his gallery with the art advisory service operated by former director at Christie's New York, Dominique Lévy, to create L&M Arts, where he is the owner and chairman.

The idea for the collaboration between the cinema and the visual arts, however, came not from the Mnuchins but from the elder Sidney Koch's wife, Sheila Nevins, who works for HBO (Home Box Office) in New York.

"I thought cinema arts and art arts," Ms. Nevins said. "I thought there was somewhat of a cultural hole. We had this long great hall, and I thought, 'Why don't I speak with Tony about this?'"

"I felt the calling. I became slightly evangelical about it," she continued of the purchase and the cross-pollination now underway there in the arts. "I thought, 'God, wow, I didn't know I'd be pouring coffee,'" she said, referring to the freshly ground coffee she made in the cinema last weekend. "There are creative, talented people there ... I do think it would be great [to have a place] where you could exchange ideas about art forms. Maybe we can work with the [Litchfield County Writers Project] or the [Litchfield] Jazz Festival. Remember, the theater really is empty during the day."

"We could have lectures in the morning when it's empty. We can have poetry readings and poetry jams. We can criss-cross art forms. To me, it seems a natural flow," she said.

"I think that the art blends very, very well with the kind of clientele that's very interested in these kinds of films. It gives exposure to the arts and it gives our clientele an opportunity to see something that's very interesting," Mr. Koch said. He added, "It's very possible that, in conjunction, with the lectures, we'll provide hospitality for people who are attending [the lectures]."

"It is a treasure not only for the area but for the state," said Mr. Carretta of the Bantam Cinema, aware that other art house theaters with gallery spaces, such as the York Square Cinema in New Haven, have closed and are now sorely missed. "They're committed to keeping the theater open. They want to extend the cultural appeal," he added of the new owners.

The Bantam Cinema is located at 115 Bantam Lake Road (Route 209) just off of Route 202. Ms. Lasar's artwork can be seen there and also at the New Arts Gallery, where her exhibition runs until April 15.

The online address for the Bantam Cinema is www.bantamcinema.com. The address for the gallery is www.newartsgallery.com.



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