

Arts alliance forming in Troy

Residents and business owners want to showcase city's art galleries and creative efforts

By ERIKA GROFF, Special to the Times Union

First published: Tuesday, November 21, 2006

TROY -- Will this be it? While books like Richard Florida's "The Rise of the Creative Class" have hailed the creative class as the force behind economic growth and urban transformation, the city has not yet fully realized or capitalized on its growing artist and creative population.

But that might change now.

Some residents and business owners in the Collar City are reviving a regional arts alliance, and, with it, the idea of coordinating local businesses and galleries to stay open later at night, one Friday each month. They will meet at 5:30 p.m. today at The Living Room on River Street to talk about how to do just that.

Among the conveners are new businesses such as Digital Artist's Space and Kismet Gallery, which opened within the past year, and Fulton Street Gallery, founded in 1997.

Fourth Fridays is the working name of the monthly marketing event in downtown Troy in which all the city galleries will have art openings or open houses on the same Friday of the month. Local restaurants, retail outlets and other venues are also invited to participate.

"The big-picture idea is to create one evening a month for people to come to downtown Troy and enjoy all the things it has to offer -- see some art, do some shopping, stay for dinner, hear some music at the Troy Music Hall or Revolution Hall. This is just a coordinated effort to try to make an event once a month," said Karen Schlessinger of Digital Artist's Space.

Schlessinger moved from New York City about 18 months ago. She knows of a similar arts initiative in the lower Hudson Valley area in which Poughkeepsie, Kingston, Beacon and Newburgh collectively marketed their region together and saw how beneficial it was to the revitalization of those cities.

Michael Weidrich serves on the board of directors for the Upstate Artists Guild and is the director of the Romaine Brooks Gallery at the Capital District Gay and Lesbian Community Center in Albany. He will be at Tuesday's meeting to share ideas and lessons learned from coordinating First Fridays gallery openings in Albany.

"It's just about creating consensus and building popular support from within the art community and the general public," he said.

He is concerned about the logistics of getting everyone on board to adjust their schedules and open on the same night.

"You have to think long-term," he said. "It has proven itself as a great event in Albany and can be the same in Troy, but logistically, adjusting the schedule isn't easy. It takes time, planning and preparation."

This isn't the first time Troy has tried to coordinate art openings and open houses. In 1998, venues such as Fulton Street Gallery, The Arts Center and Rensselaer County Historical Society coordinated to have their exhibit openings at the same time twice each year, said Colleen Skiff of Fulton Street Gallery. The momentum stopped, however, as galleries closed their doors for good.

She links the slowdown of former art night initiatives to a few factors: alternative spaces, coordinating everyone's schedules and having the shows only twice each year wasn't enough.

This time around, Skiff said there's a different feel. Like Schlessinger, she said there's no reason why the monthly Troy arts walk can't attract the same people who would frequent Albany's Lark Street and the First Fridays arts openings in Albany.

"A lot of people in this region still have this idea there's nothing going on here (in Troy) and there's no reason to come here," Schlessinger said. "At 5 p.m. when everyone goes home, Troy gets very quiet and that doesn't make any sense to me. It's an art, cultural and shopping destination."

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