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Jack Fischer

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- Attractions Listings
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- Buy and Sell Tickets

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- Local News
- Nation/World
- The Valley
- Cupertino/Sunnyvale
- Los Gatos/Saratoga
- Los Altos/Palo Alto
- Peninsula & San Francisco
- Alameda County
- Northern California
- Education
- Obituaries
- Science & Health
- Special Reports
- Weather

Classifieds

- Automotive
- Real Estate
- Employment
- Personals

Opinion

- Perspective
- Columnists

Lifestyles

- Family & Religion
- Food & Wine
- Home & Garden
- Travel

Posted on Sun, Jan. 19, 2003

The Mercury News

CON

visual arts

Artists fill in the blanks in downtown S.J.

By Jack Fischer
Mercury News

After nearly two decades of San Jose's redevelopment agency struggling to fill downtown's storefronts, it seems a small design firm has found the way to do it.

Really, it's a wonder no one thought of it before:

City leaders hate nothing so much as the blank stare of a vacant retail window, and local artists love nothing so much as a place to show their work.

Phantom Galleries is a program run by a local graphic design firm called Two Fish Design that gives unrented storefronts to Bay Area artists to exhibit their art for free.

"We got so tired of looking at empty windows every day," says Cherri Lakey, co-owner of Two Fish, which conceived of and runs the program as part of its membership in a cooperative of downtown groups called Populus Presents, created to foment events in the city core. "We've been kicking it around for a couple years," Lakey says.

The galleries began appearing last August at just a few locations around San Fernando and South First streets, and momentum has been picking up since then. Now 16 artists are showing work in 10 storefronts near those corners, and Lakey says Populus has its eyes on another eight to 10 downtown.

(Quite on its own, the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, for many months now, has offered a window installation program it calls Night Moves, after-hours exhibits of new-media art, often video-based, in each of the institute's two storefront windows. The window

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- » [Celebrities](#)
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- » [Events](#)
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- » [Music](#)
- » [Performing Arts](#)
- » [TV](#)
- » [Visual Arts](#)

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San Jose	↑64 ↓44
Oakland	↑60 ↓42

Local Events**Yellow Pages****Discussion Boards****Maps & Directions**

on First Street has ``Drip Drop: Life and Age'' by Jeanne Finley and John Muse. The Market Street window has Chris Eckert's strobe-lit, kinetic sculpture ``Perpetual Labor.'')

The Phantom Galleries work has ranged from fairly modest and conventional watercolors and ceramics to the wilder wire sculptures of Francisco Graciano, whose obsessive and engaging series of connected faces fills the windows of 25 W. San Fernando. Down the street, at 80 S. First, Susan O'Malley offers ``Susie's Supermart," a faintly subversive installation that initially appears to showcase the store's products, but on closer inspection proves to be merchandise a few peculiar degrees off plumb, such as the arms of dolls, a dental retainer and a thermostat.

At 70 S. First, artist Ellie Brown offers ``Girl/Woman/Girl," a collection of exotic pink dresses and other girls' and women's clothes that resonate as clothing store merchandise but -- in part because they *are* all pink -- also serve as a subtle exploration of cultural expectations for women.

``People walk by and some of them like something and some of them hate it, but at least they're talking about art," says Two Fish co-owner Brian Eder.

At first, the galleries mostly consisted of framed work standing in the windows. But with increasing frequency, the artists are creating installations specifically for the windows, making more inventive use of the space. ``We knew we had to start that way" -- with the conventional, framed work -- ``and then ramp it up," Eder says.

The offerings change every other month. Populus holds a public reception to showcase the new work from 7 to 9 p.m. on the third Thursday of every month at 55 S. First St. That's the same night when a variety of other downtown art venues -- MACLA, Works, the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles, the NewSkool gallery, the Circle-A Gallery and the Cafe Matisse's XPO gallery -- stay open a bit later than usual (until 8 p.m.).

In fairness to the redevelopment agency, it was officials there who first solicited ideas for ways to enliven the downtown that led to the Phantom Galleries, one of 10 programs Populus runs, from concerts to art markets. The other members of the group, coordinated by the San Jose Downtown Association, are Giant Creative Services, Labadie Productions, Filco Events, Prime Time Entertainment and Gary Walker Productions.

Eder says the fact that the program wasn't designed to make any money nearly sank it with some fellow Populus members. But, while no one *is* making any money from the retail space, at least people are coming to look at it, and downtown is that much less desolate as it waits for the hordes to fill the burgeoning apartments popping up



GET NOK



everywhere like mushrooms.

Eder and Lakey even have received a query from a downtown group in St Paul, Minn., whose organizers saw the program on the Web and were looking for help to launch a similar effort. Lakey says Two Fish is thinking about putting together a kit to help other places create Phantom Galleries of their own.

“For the artists, this is social activism,” Eder says.

And with characteristic contrary optimism, he adds that, as the Phantom Galleries demonstrate, the downturn in the economy can be as much opportunity as obstacle, if you have the right mindset.

“These are good times,” Eder says. “When the economy is good, it’s just about who has the deep pockets. Right now, it’s all about ideas.”

To learn more about participating in the Phantom Galleries, visit www.populuspresents.com.

The Phantom Galleries

25 W. San Fernando: Wire sculpture by Francisco Graciano

17 W. San Fernando: Circuit board art by Adriana Varella

23 W. San Fernando: Story boxes from found objects, by Veronique R. Brown

99 S. First: Funky jazzy pop art paintings by Sonya Paz; dioramas by Jessie Rose Vala; work by participants in the Metro-sponsored Lomo contest

97 S. First: “Paintings for the Goddess Within You” by Julie Valentine

95 S. First: Watercolor and mixed media by Jen Norton

80 S. First: “Susie’s Supermart” by Susan O’Malley

76 S. First: “Infested” by Chris Eckert (view after dark); “Larvae” by Karen Carlo Salinger

70 S. First: Work by members of the Orchard Valley Ceramic Arts Guild; “Cultivation” by Eric Otto; “Hat Trick” by Carol Worthington Levy; “Girl/Woman/Girl” by Ellie Brown

p.m. on the third Thursday of each month at 55 S. First

Artist receptions with light refreshments and entertainment are 7-9