

Artists market

Studio E Partners aims to forge closer connections between artists, buyers

By Tong Zhang

A handful of collectors and art lovers gathered one recent day in a small room, where splatters of paint on the wooden floor reminded them how the late Brockie Stevenson used to create his masterpieces – looking at the world outside his window, next to the Glen Echo Park.

The small studio opened to the public for the first time as part of an effort from Edith Graves and Elisabeth Hayes, co-founders of Studio E Partners, a self-described alternative art gallery in Bethesda designed to make it easier for collectors to get to know the artist and the art.

Alternative to what, you ask? To the experience of appreciating art hanging on a wall with price tags and merely saying, “I’ll take No. 10. Ship it to me.”

Graves and Hayes, first cousins and long-time partners, started in September 2012 connecting artists with art lovers, having them tell their stories and develop richer connections – through private meetings, phone conversations or even emails.

“It’s like matchmakers,” says Graves, or “a backstage pass to the concert where you can go and meet the performers. That’s what we’re trying to do.”

Today, the studio represents 10 emerging and established artists across the country, including Stevenson as well as photographer Rodney Smith, landscape painter Ellen Sinel and Brece Honeycutt, who creates drawings, sculptures and installations.

The studio signs a one-year contract with each artist, offering his or her own open studio. However, the artists are also represented by galleries, so Studio E Partners is not an exclusive representative.

Customers buy pieces from the artist di-

rectly, at an open house or a one-on-one meeting, with prices ranging from \$200 to more than \$15,000. Studio E Partners then collects a commission, which is a bit less than the standard 50 percent to 60 percent for gallery owners.

Graves and Hayes helped showcase the clothing and interior designs of Graves’ mother, and hosted informal events for the last 20 years. The idea was to gather neighbors and friends who might not have access to the creative people.

Artists also want to know who is buying their work. And after “giving birth” to a piece with sweat and tears, Graves says, handing it off to a gallery is like “putting it up for adoption.”

Graves is the daughter of the late Winthrop Faulkner, a prominent architect best known for designing houses in the contemporary style, so she inherited a family tradition of uniting artists and collectors.

The two women hold bachelor’s degrees in art history, and they both have worked as marketing professionals, but they are on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of skills.

Graves worked as a marketing director while Hayes forged a career in financial services. Hayes even owned her own consulting business, translating marketing strategy to the corporate world.

Hayes describes herself as the “Excel spreadsheet,” the left brain-oriented planner and analytical half of the duo. Graves, innovative and visionary, leans more toward the right brain.

The recession is still affecting the art market, but the partners are optimistic.

THE BASICS

Company: Studio E Partners

What it does: An art gallery alternative that makes it easier for collectors and artists to connect.

Leadership: Principals Edith Graves and Elisabeth Hayes

Location: Bethesda

Startup cost: \$20,000 to \$25,000

Source of startup funds: Personal investment

Website: www.studioepartners.com



JOANNE S. LAWTON / STAFF

Art enthusiasts Edith Graves, left, and Elisabeth Hayes started up their new studio in the fall of 2012 to offer fellow art lovers more access to the artists.

Collectors and everyday folks alike “can always find more wall space for something,” says Hayes. “People cannot have enough art in their life.”

A launch event – an open house and portfolio review for all artists – held last November in Chevy Chase convinced the partners that the concept has traction. The turnout was strong, with more than 800 people attending. In the subsequent two weeks, about 20 pieces were sold.

But the challenge for the business remains keeping the momentum going. To represent high-quality art, they’ve opted to take things slowly.

“We’re not pushing anything. We’re not sending out catalogues, we’re not selling online,” Graves says.

The Studio E Partners philosophy can be seen by touring Graves’ house. From a huge, bright silk screen to a painting with geometrical patterns, every wall holds a different story.

“Art speaks to me,” Graves says. “This is a simple house. There is nothing fancy. But you just feel like it has a soul.”