

PREVIEWART

Vessel turns up volume on Oakland art scene

By Jennifer Modenessi

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DURING OAKLAND'S most recent Art Murrur, a monthly event celebrating the opening of new shows, visitors poured into Vessel Gallery in droves.

Owner and curator Lonnie Lee was caught off guard. She had no wine to offer the packs of art lovers who slipped in for an impromptu preview — her gallery hadn't even officially opened yet.

But Lee plans to be prepared June 4 for the next Murrur. Vessel, the art space she opened in Berkeley's Claremont district in 2004, has settled into its new home in Auto Row, joining newish venues such as Krowwork, a photography and video space, Mercury 20 and Chandra Cerrito Contemporary, which recently moved into the neighborhood.

Lee is among the growing number of dealers providing exhibition venues for the city's exploding population of artists. Her gallery is just the latest among those dotting the area between 23rd and 26th streets at Telegraph Avenue and Broadway injecting life into a city that's had difficulty developing new businesses.

"I want art to be for everyone to experience," she says, pulling up pictures on her laptop showing what the 5,000-square-foot gallery looked like only a few months before.

In search of a larger home for Vessel, the Oakland resident stumbled upon the 100-plus-year-old A-frame building. Although its interior was covered in a thick layer of dust, the building had good bones and Lee immediately saw its potential.

So she decided to work with what was already there. After renting the space from owners Matt and Diane Iglehart, she enlisted friends to



VESSEL GALLERY/COURTESY

Oakland's Vessel Gallery is housed in a former livery stable. The open, airy design is the perfect backdrop for Cyrus Tilton's sculptures and drawings, on display in "A Place In-between" through June 5.

help renovate the building and retain some features from its days as a livery stable and then an auto glass factory. The floorboards remained. So did the stairwells, including one at the front of the gallery which leads upstairs. It's a bit like walking up to Granny's attic, Lee says. You have no idea what you'll encounter.

Until June 5, visitors will find sculptures by Oakland artist Cyrus Tilton filling most of the cavernous second floor. "A Place In-between" gathers the artist's kinetic, mixed-media pieces depicting haunting, fragmented figures. Viewers are invited to interact with works such as "Unicycle," where the turn of a metal crank sets a figure holding a basket of papier-mache birds into motion. Other works such as "Run" are static, but their surreal forms — in this case, a headless torso of what looks like a hare or dog in flight — set the imagination



LIREILLE/COURTESY

Glass tears cascade from a copper yoke by artist Wendy McDermott at Lireille Gallery of Contemporary Jewelry and Art in Piedmont.

racing. Tilton's preparatory sketches and drawings are featured downstairs.

Lee also is showing jewelry by Southern California resident Eric Silva, who specializes in inventive combinations of metal, stones and recycled materials such as

antler horn.

With its open, airy plan and adjacent rooftop garden, Vessel can accommodate much more than what was possible in its previous 500-square-foot home, Lee says. It's less of a lifestyle boutique and more of a fine art gallery — although not in the traditional sense. A nook near the front windows contains two antique couches, books and an acoustic guitar. It looks like the perfect place to sip tea or kick back and jam with friends. Occasionally, Vessel will double as a performance space.

"My whole intention was to make a gallery warm," Lee says, explaining that she's never been interested in showing art in a "vanilla-white box" catering to a specific clientele. The goal was to create a space where everyone from 9- to 90-year-olds feels welcome and can delight in interacting with art.

"The energy happening around here is wonderful," Lee says. "It's nice to see new

ART BOOM

The neighborhood around 25th Street near Telegraph Avenue in Oakland is home to a number of galleries. Here are a few to check out:

Vessel, 471 25th St., 510-893-8800 or www.vessel-gallery.com.

Mercury 20, 475 25th St., 510-701-4620, 415-990-1549 or www.mercurytwenty.com.

Krowwork, 480 23rd St., 510-229-7035 or www.krowwork.com.

Chandra Cerrito Contemporary, 480 23rd St., 510-260-7494 or www.chandracerrito.com.

21 Grand, 416 25th St., 510-444-7263, www.21grand.org.

Oakopolis Creativity Center, 447 25th St., 510-663-6920 or www.oakpolis.org.

Hatch Gallery, 492 23rd St., 510-879-7382, www.hatchgallery.org.

businesses developing — it's a wonderful sign of things to come."

Art of motherhood

Issues of motherhood and femininity are woven into the wearable sculpture of artist and teacher Wendy McDermott, whose works are on display in "Eve" at Lireille Gallery of Contemporary Jewelry and Art in Piedmont through May 29.

Nearly a dozen pieces, including an installation of oversized heart-shaped lockets, address the complexities, joy and heartache of domestic life. The work, McDermott says in an artist's statement, grew out of her own experiences as a wife and mother and includes the stories of other women on similar paths "partly chosen by them and partly chosen

for them by traditional societal values and expectations."

"Cry" is a form of battle armor. The collar offers its wearer protection in the form of three hammered copper plates that cover the shoulders and heart. It's as delicate as it is fierce: Hundreds of fragile glass tears dangle from wire tendrils.

In "Yoke," small bronze babies form a cape-like net. Many pieces double as necklaces and collars and are comprised of to-do lists, pills, shredded bills and other domestic ephemera. "Aspire," McDermott's most humorous piece, is fun and biting. A huge tiara, a string of grapefruit-sized pearls and a massive blingy ring allude to the "grandiose" — and the unrealistic standards of beauty and perfection placed on women.

Gallery hours are 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays and noon-5 p.m. Sundays at 3980 Piedmont Ave., Oakland. Contact 510-547-3455 or www.lireille.com.

Endings, beginnings

Photographer Linda Elvira Piedra will host a final open studio in her work space at the Lower Annex of Grace North Church in Berkeley from 1-5 p.m. May 30.

Piedra, who moved to the Bay Area in 2007 from New Mexico, will close her darkroom and relocating to the East Coast, where she has been photographing Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

Her exquisite black-and-white prints reflect her interest in landscapes, botanical subjects and the figure, including self-portraiture. View her work at 2138 Cedar St., Berkeley. Contact 510-725-5141 or www.lindaelvrapiedra.com and www.photoeye.com.