

Nurture vs. Nature

*Making a living in the art world is not easy
These four are finding a way*

By **MARY JANE FINE**

They call themselves the Nurture Artists alliance: Four local friends and determined women. Twice each month, they come together in the welcoming space above Elite Cleaners in Westerly – a studio shared by painter Laura Gaffke and photographer Maria Scaglione, whose work adorns the walls.

The steep wooden stairs that lead to it groan with age – the building once housed a sewing factory – and hand-

THE ARTISTS

ANNIEWILDEY.COM

DIANASARTOR.COM

KATHYJOHNSONART.COM

LAURAGAFFKE.COM

printed signs affixed to the risers caution and encourage visitors to “Please Be Careful” and “Catch Your Breath” and, near the top, “Getting Warmer.”

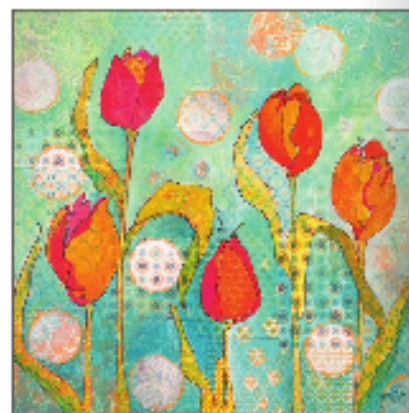
The Art Salon itself is getting warmer, too. The group is a work in progress, much

as a work of art is a work in progress, a painting that changes shape or direction, that adds color or subtracts elements or over-paints a subject altogether.

The women cherish their every-other-Wednesday gathering – both business model and artist support group – for the work ethic it encourages as much as for the pure enjoyment of one another’s company.

For Annie Wildey, the group is “very much a place to be vulnerable and to talk through some of the various road-blocks and champion one another. We all have different strengths and weaknesses, but we don’t have all of the strengths in one package, so working together is a way we can maximize the potential of the group, together.”

And so a few months ago, the women created a website for themselves (nurtureartists.weebly.com) and posted a definition: “Nurture – the process of caring for and encouraging the





FROM LEFT:
"FERN #2" AND "END OF SEASON."
BY KATHY JOHNSON



FROM LEFT:
"LEAF FORMS" AND
"MAGENTA BLOOMS."
BY DIANA SARTOR



BELOW FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
"THE WAVE" AND
"WILD SPIRITS."
BY LAURA GAFFKE

THE NURTURE ARTISTS
ALLIANCE (FROM LEFT):
LAURA GAFFKE, ANNIE
WILDEY, DIANA SARTOR,
AND KATHY JOHNSON.



FROM LEFT:
"1856" 36x48
AND "MISQUAMICUT
WAVE" 48x60.
BY ANNIE WILDEY



growth or development of someone or something."

Still, the site's overall purpose seemed a tad murky: A marketing tool, to thrust their names before the public? A virtual gallery, aimed at sales? A statement of sisterhood that might lead to group shows of their work? A sort of incubator for any and all possibilities?

Yes, yes, yes and yes, as it turns out.

The struggle of artists to define themselves and their work – and to sell it and make their living from it – has been well documented over the decades. Vincent Van Gogh never sold a painting in his lifetime, and the young Pablo Picasso was so discouraged by the lack of interest in his Blue Period paintings that he left Paris in 1902 and returned to his parents' home in Barcelona for a year.

In a recent review of a new art book, New York Times art critic Holland Cotter noted that establishing, explaining and marketing one's work has become a necessary part of the art business – "an essential skill . . . (in) a competitive marketplace."

But artists – with some notable exceptions (Andy Warhol comes to mind) – tend not to be spotlight seekers and can be modest and self-doubting to a fault. Part of the Nurture Artists mission as a group is to bolster one another in the face of self-doubt and to share suggestions for boosting self-confidence.

Their mission statement reads: "We provide a safe, supportive and nurturing environment.

We encourage each other to be fearless, creative, vulnerable and honest, as we share our knowledge, support, and time together. We are committed to meeting regularly, to ensure the continued growth of our individual creative and financial goals."

The group was five – Annie Wildey, Diana Sartor, Kathy Johnson, Laura Gaffke and Maria Scaglione – until this past spring, when Maria chose to withdraw,

at least temporarily, due to other commitments.

The evenings tend to begin with a catching-up period that allowed Diana Sartor, for example, to talk at a recent get-together about the painting she'd sold – a stunning watercolor or floral abstract – at the prestigious Architectural Digest Show in New York. Annie Wildey used the time to recount her move into a larger space – "with a window!" – in Stonington's Velvet Mill.

"We spend so much time in our individual studios – alone," Kathy Johnson says, of the rewards the group

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provides. "And then to get together, to be able to share the ideas and talk about what we're doing in that alone time is really great for me."

And, as Maria Scaglione pointed out last spring, the region is not like New York City, where the arts community is vast and intertwined, and where the opportunity to talk technique or celebrate success or commiserate is never far away.

"We live in small towns," she said, "so we don't have the luxury of lots of people doing the same thing."

The women also trade ideas for effective online marketing strategies, and for engaging in the real-world marketplace as well. Sometimes they talk about goals, immediate and long-term. Sometimes, one will ask the others to critique her work.

"We are very individual artists," Scaglione said at the spring session.

An understatement, that.

Sartor works with vibrant watercolor inks. Wildey paints in oils to capture realistic oceanscapes. Johnson repurposes the likes of tea bags, coffee filters, leaf skeletons and other throw-aways in striking collages. Gaffke paints cheerful, whimsical flowers, work that all but covers the Art Salon studio's rear walls.

"SOLD" stick-on dot pasted beneath a work.

"It was a way for us to test the water," Wildey said. "A way to get a larger audience."

It was also, as it turned out, a way to expand the reach of the Art Salon and their website. Other artists who attended the show asked about the group and about the website, leading Wildey and Sartor and Johnson and Gaffke to begin discussing a twice-yearly online newsletter in which they would share the tips and insights they glean from each other.

And, Annie Wildey said, one thing led to another. If they hadn't planned the "Great & Small" show, she wouldn't have sent out e-blast invitations to it. And if she hadn't sent those out, she wouldn't have made the online sales that followed.

"It gets the energy flowing," she said.

Diana Sartor's and Kathy Johnson's energy flowed into submitting their work to a gallery in Essex where neither had exhibited before. "We both submitted collages," Sartor said. "That's a new area for me."

And that, they all agree, is part of the Art Salon's purpose. To energize. To promote. To inspire.

"For me, the making of goals keeps me going," Johnson says. "It's so much easier to just sit in front of the TV. This keeps me moving."

Their age range spans from mid-30s to mid-60s. Annie Wildey is British; Maria Scaglione, Italian. Kathy Johnson holds a full-time job in a small print shop, stealing hours of her free time to work on her art; Diana Sartor is a full-time artist. Laura Gaffke thinks of her work as "a spiritual practice ... a visual meditation."

For all of them, producing art is a joy – and selling art is both income and professional validation.

In late June, the women held their first joint exhibit, a sales experiment of sorts and a less stressful atmosphere than at a solo show in which an artist is the lone focus of attention.

The exhibit, called "Great & Small," was held in Wildey's studio, with wine and cheese and fruit and nuts, during Velvet Mill's twice-yearly Open Studio event. They fretted a bit – was hanging their work together a mistake, an eye-challenging mess? – but when their paintings were all in place, it created a stunning crazy quilt of colors and styles.

Outside, cars filled the sprawling parking lot. Inside, throngs of people strolled from gallery to gallery, looking, admiring and, now and then, buying. For the Art Salon women, it was a relief – and a success: "We all had red dots!" Gaffke crowed at their next get-together, referring to the

SEE FOR YOURSELF

"It's an Adventure" – Spectrum Gallery, group exhibition, 61 Main St, Centerbrook, CT Diana Sartor and Kathy Johnson, through Sept. 13.

"Water, Water Everywhere: Paeon to a Vanishing Resource" – Alexey von Schlippe Gallery, UConn – Avery Point, Annie Wildey, Sept. 11-26

Ongoing exhibit, Diana Sartor: Silver Circle Art Gallery, 75 Main Street #3, Putnam, CT.

Ongoing exhibit, Annie Wildey: The Velvet Mill, Stonington, CT, Sat. and Sun. 11 a.m.-3 p.m. (or email anniewildey@mac.com for an appointment during the week); Cate Charles Gallery, 251 S Main St, Providence, RI.

Ongoing exhibit, Laura Gaffke: by appointment only, Above Elite Studios, 181 Main St., Westerly, RI, (email laura.gaffke@me.com for an appointment)

National Collage Society, Kathy Johnson, annual online exhibit, Nov. 23, 2015 – Nov. 1, 2016