

Mt. Airy residents bring fine art to First Friday

By PATRICK COBBS
Staff Writer

With visual artists Colin and Andrea Keefe's May 1 opening of a new gallery at 25 West Mt. Airy Avenue, the two Brooklyn transplants are set to make this week's First Friday look a bit like an Old City arts crawl.

"It's like a mix of backyard barbeque and high art," Colin joked.

But while the setting of the back lot carriage house is undeniably residential, the show inside has every appearance of a 3rd Street gallery. In fact, the details of the project are shaping up to be a convincing illustration of the power, and grace, of social networking in the art world.

"We are pretty psyched," Andi summarized.

The show, which opens May 1 from 6 to 9 p.m., looks at the work of Philadelphia artist

Wendy Wolf and Brooklyn artist Robert Walden but it also asked them to select two more artists who they admire to offer work as well. The result was an invitation to four artists whom the Keefes did not know, Patty Cateura, Ana B. Hernández, Robert Lansden and Althea Murphy-Price.

This approach was a self-conscious move away from the way most galleries assemble their shows. "Everything you see there is about their eye," Colin explained. "And I don't know that we are about that."

What they are about, and the mission of the Mt. Airy Contemporary Artists Space, is to engage with people and art. That means reaching out and being open to the surprises of new work, and hopefully also new enthusiasts from off the beaten path of the downtown art

scene. Andi likened the theory to attending a friend's party. "It usually works out that you like your friends' friends."

With no curatorial override for the pieces chosen by Wolf and Walden, the notion of trust plays heavy in this inaugural show. But then trust, or possibly a leap of faith, has been central to the Keefes lives since moving with their 2-year old son, Sam, to Philadelphia a year and half ago.

The move meant a whole new city and a whole new scene, but also the possibility of including art in their lives in a whole new way.

"New York is a good place to be part of the audience but it's hard to kind of chip in," Andi explained. "One of the thoughts moving to Philly was that we could contribute."

Enter their discovery of Mt.



Above left: Gallery owners Colin and Andi Keefe. Above right: the entrance to Mt. Airy Contemporary Artists Space at 25 West Mt. Airy Avenue.



Airy and the lucky find of an end row with a carriage house in the back. That new possibility came alive.

"This was perfect," Andi said. "It was exactly what we wanted."

Having a separate studio meant spending 24 hours away from your child. Here we can do art and still hear the baby monitor."

They moved in and started renovating the carriage house right away. But things always take longer than you want, especially when Mom is a Philadelphia public school art teacher by day and Dad is a software developer. Result: they are opening the gallery a year later than they originally planned. Still, you won't see a trace of disappointment on their faces.

That's because not only has the show come together better than they could have expected but they are starting to actually get noticed in the Philadelphia art establishment. Recently their show has appeared on The Art Blog by Roberta Fallon and Libby Rosof, two of Philly's most influential art mavens.

But best of all they are making real connections with artists whose work they love.

The Keefes are not charging admission to the space and they don't get a cut if one of the paintings is sold. They are also not showing their own work in this show, or in any of the planned four shows per year. The reason relates to another component of their leap of faith in creating the space.

"It needs to give enough value to the community to counter any downside to people walking up and down your block," Colin said.

In other words, it's one thing - a very good thing - to get the attention of the art world, but it won't be worth it if this effort isn't also a fit for the neighborhood.

So, after a year of preparation, Colin and Andi hope to see their big risk finally prove out. There are worries to be sure. Will the space be large enough? Will people find it? But overall there is

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hope. The hope that art enthusiasts will accept the effort for the brilliance of the work inside, and that Mt Airy-ites who might not normally attend an arts crawl will use the space to make art a bigger part of their lives.

The show And so on and so forth opens Friday May 1 from 6 to 9 p.m. and runs Saturdays from 12 to 4 p.m. until June 6 at 25 West Mt. Airy Avenue. For more information visit www.mtairycontemporary.com.