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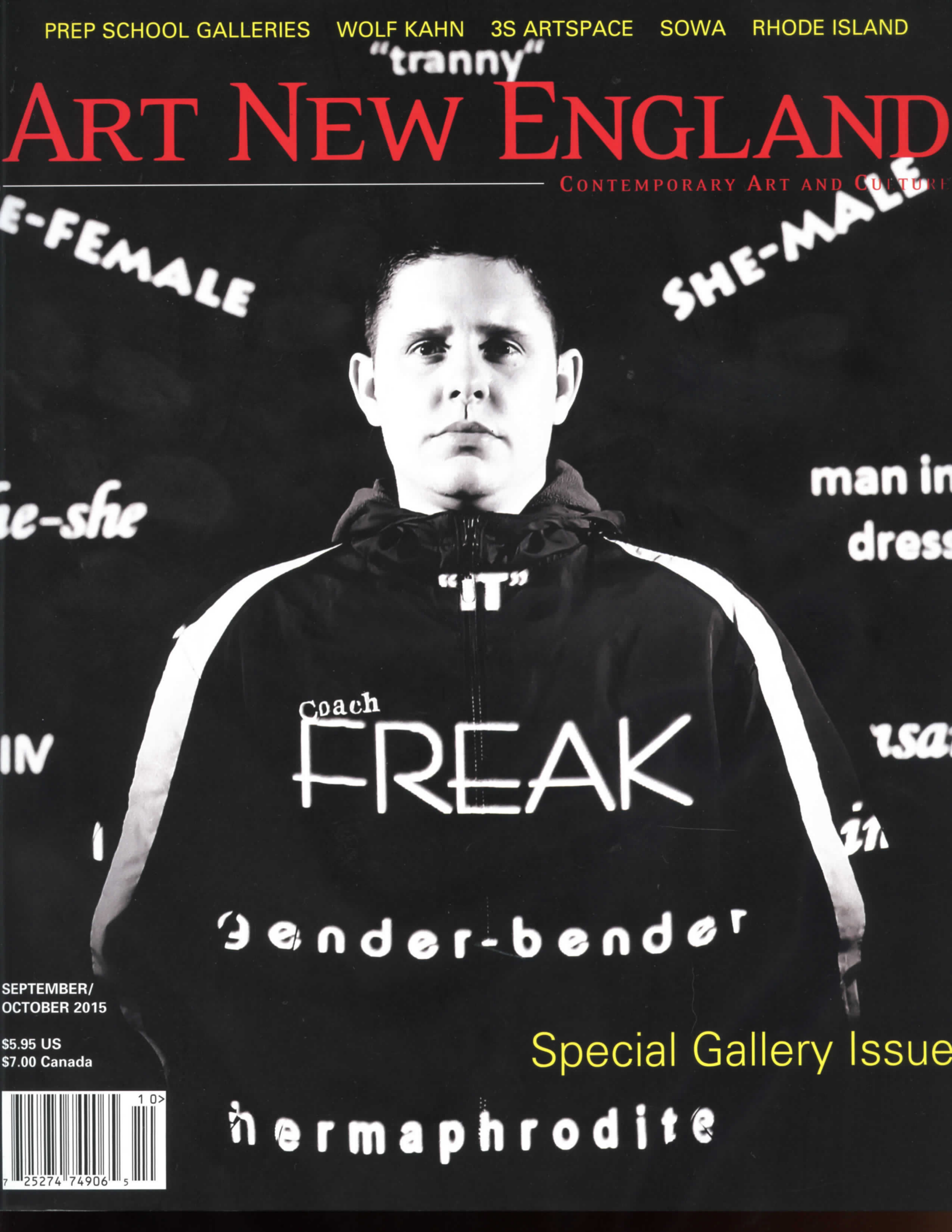

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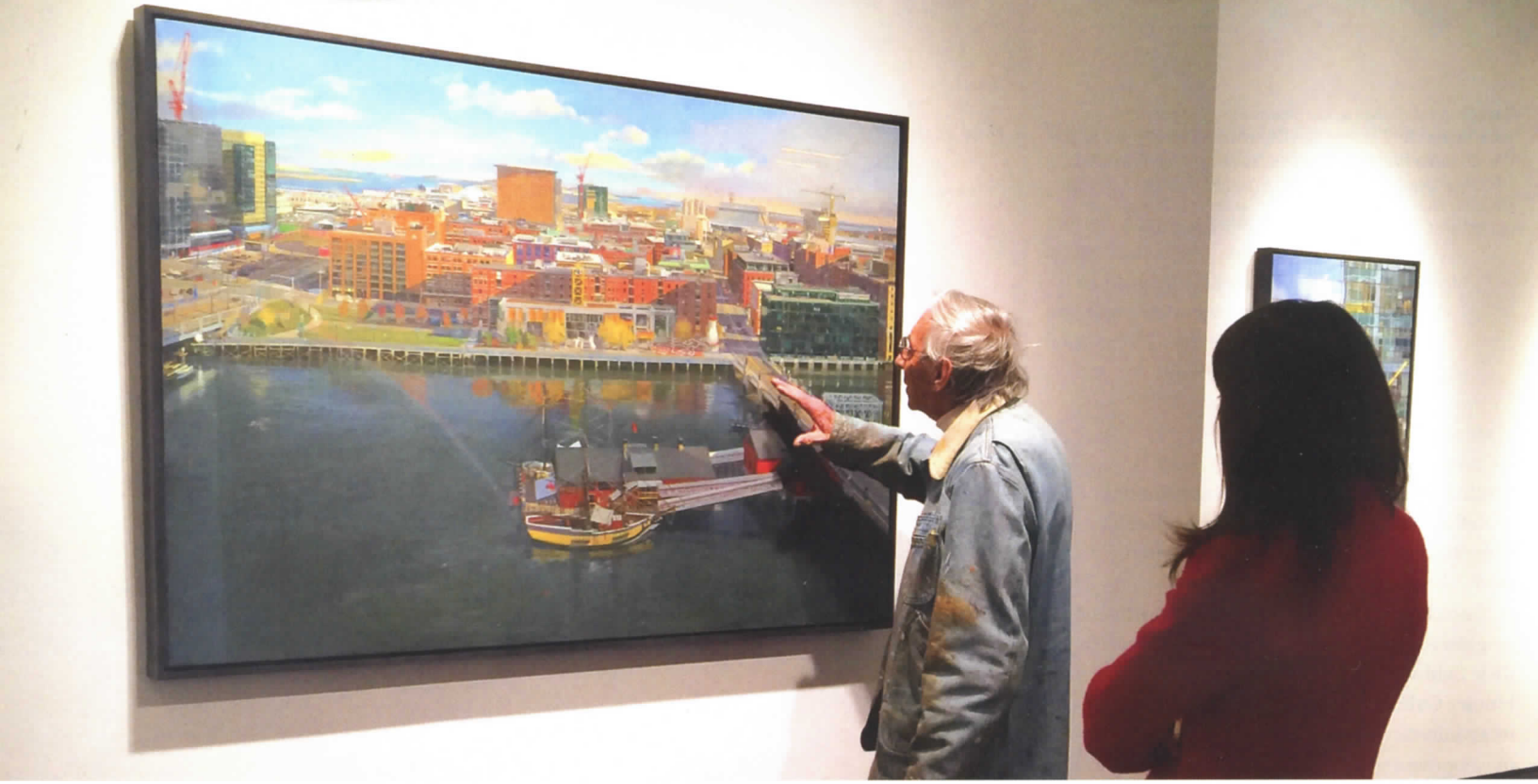


Why Do We Need GALLERIES?

In an era of art fairs, Internet sales and high-stake auctions, these dealers believe galleries are more relevant than ever.

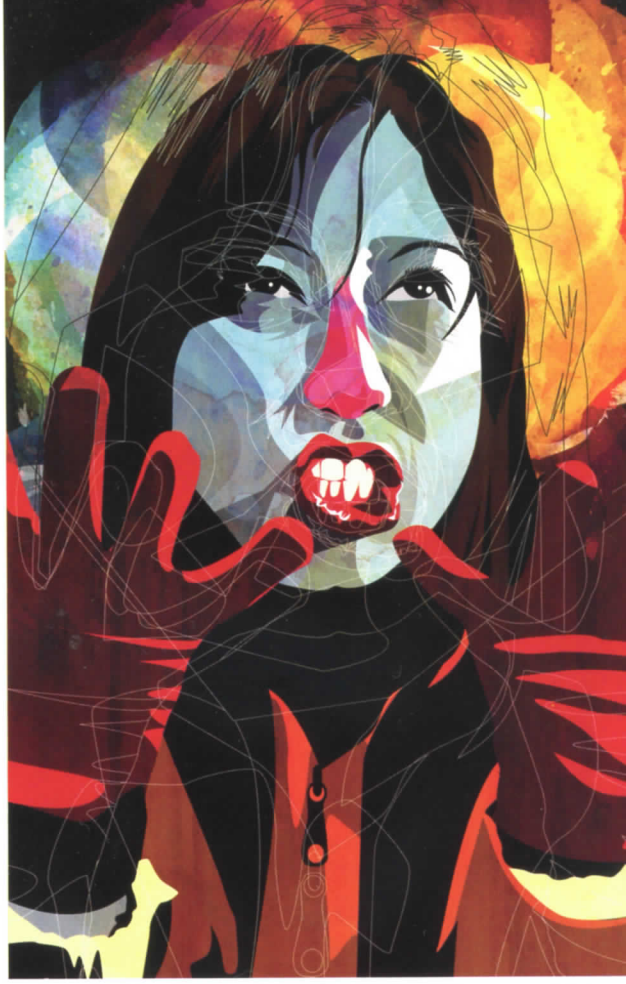
DEBBIE HAGAN

AROUND 2009, THE BOSTON art scene shifted. Nine galleries along Newbury Street closed or moved to SoWa—a formerly gritty Boston neighborhood south of Washington Street. Then Nielsen Gallery, a leading contemporary art dealer, shut for good after 46 years. When the lease came due, Nina Nielsen explains, she and husband John Baker, sat down and looked at their future. Though the gallery remained strong, they decided to try something different. They began dealing privately from their home.

"Art is about the human spirit and the eternal development of human beings," says Nielsen, who worked hard as a gallerist to nurture that spirit in artists and pass it along to art buyers. "Making sales was not the primary goal of the gallery. That has completely changed. Certainly the goal of the gallery was not showing what is hot at the moment." She left Newbury Street disenchanted, seeing too much focus on marketing and not enough on the art.

Nielsen's story begs a larger question: Are traditional galleries—those where artists consign their work and gallerists stage rotating exhibitions and take approximately 50 percent of sales—still relevant? From this partnership, artists gain exposure in prestigious galleries, sales to collectors and contact with the art press. However, a

Opposite: George Nick and Gallery NAGA director Meg White discuss a painting by Richard Raiselis, November 2014. Nick, an artist, is an avid painter whose work frequents the gallery. Right: Alvaro Tapia Hialgo, *Angelica*, from the artist's *Angry People Project*, 2015, digital print. Photo: Hidalgo. Below: Eric Ben-Kiki, director of EBK Gallery, and artist Tim Wengertsman work on the creation and installation of *The Last Supper in Hartford* (acrylic on canvas, 24 x 8')—a new painting debuting at the gallery this fall. Both images courtesy of EBK Gallery.

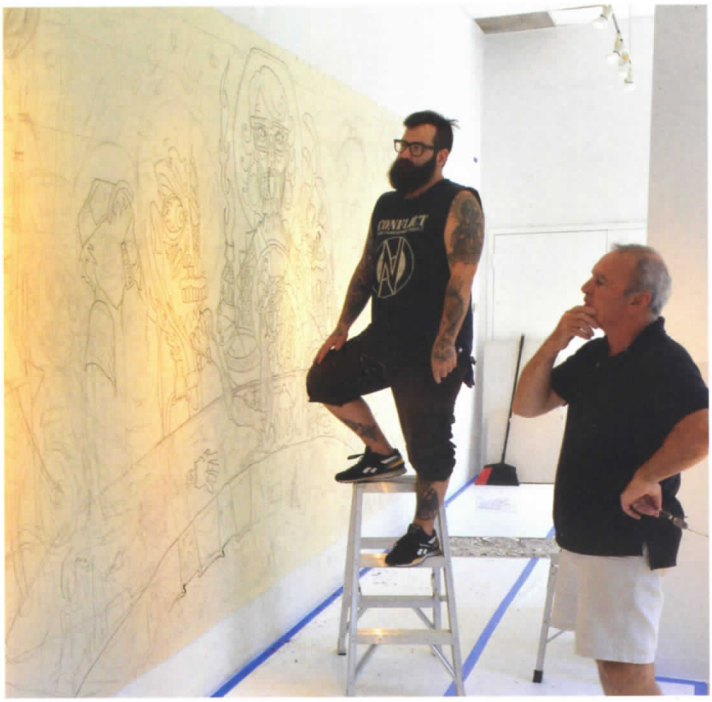


growing number of artists wonder, why not put up a website and sell their work online or in their studios.

At age 73, Berta Walker is constantly on the go—running her eponymous gallery in Provincetown, MA, for the past 26 years. Now she is setting up a second gallery in Wellfleet, MA, (formerly Kendall Gallery).

"It's so labor intensive to run a gallery," says Walker, explaining that the calm everyone sees is a façade. "Since I've been in business, I've seen artists who do fairly well, who didn't do so well before they joined the gallery." Her responsibility, as she sees it, is to create a market for her artists which follows them throughout their careers and beyond. Artists who don't have a market either bring low prices at auction or don't sell at all, which can kill the artist's reputation.

"My goal is not to put art on the walls and make a lot of money," she says. "It's nice to make money, yet the joy of the day is when someone comes in and gets really excited. It's like learning a new word or learning a new philosophy. When we've had a sale, it's a different high that you can't create any other way. It's communication from the audience." She sees the art market as three-sided, like a pyramid: artist, gallerist and collector. When the art finds its way to the collector, Walker says "it's a gratifying completion."



Though Eric Ben-Kiki, a picture framer and former exhibit designer at the Wadsworth Atheneum, has only been in the gallery business a little over a year, he understands the challenges in art dealing. At EBK Gallery in Hartford, CT, he has staged 40 solo exhibitions in just 14 months. He likes two-week show cycles, featuring small, unusual, contemporary work.

For each artist, he creates a clean, well-organized web page featuring photos of the works exhibited, a price list, artist's résumé and a short bio and description of the art. Artists use these pages to promote themselves.

"They find it's more exhausting to manage and maintain a website than doing their own work," says Ben-Kiki. "That's why galleries are important. Artists should be in the world that they love: their own studios."

Historically, artists have found this to be one of the key benefits of gallery representation. Few want to broker their own work, and most dread the business side of art-making. They just want to be making art.

"The concept of the gallery is changing quite a bit, but I think the brick and mortar space and the web are totally interdependent," Ben-Kiki says. While the website is designed to intrigue viewers, the exhibit enables gallery followers to see the actual work—not just a digital facsimile.

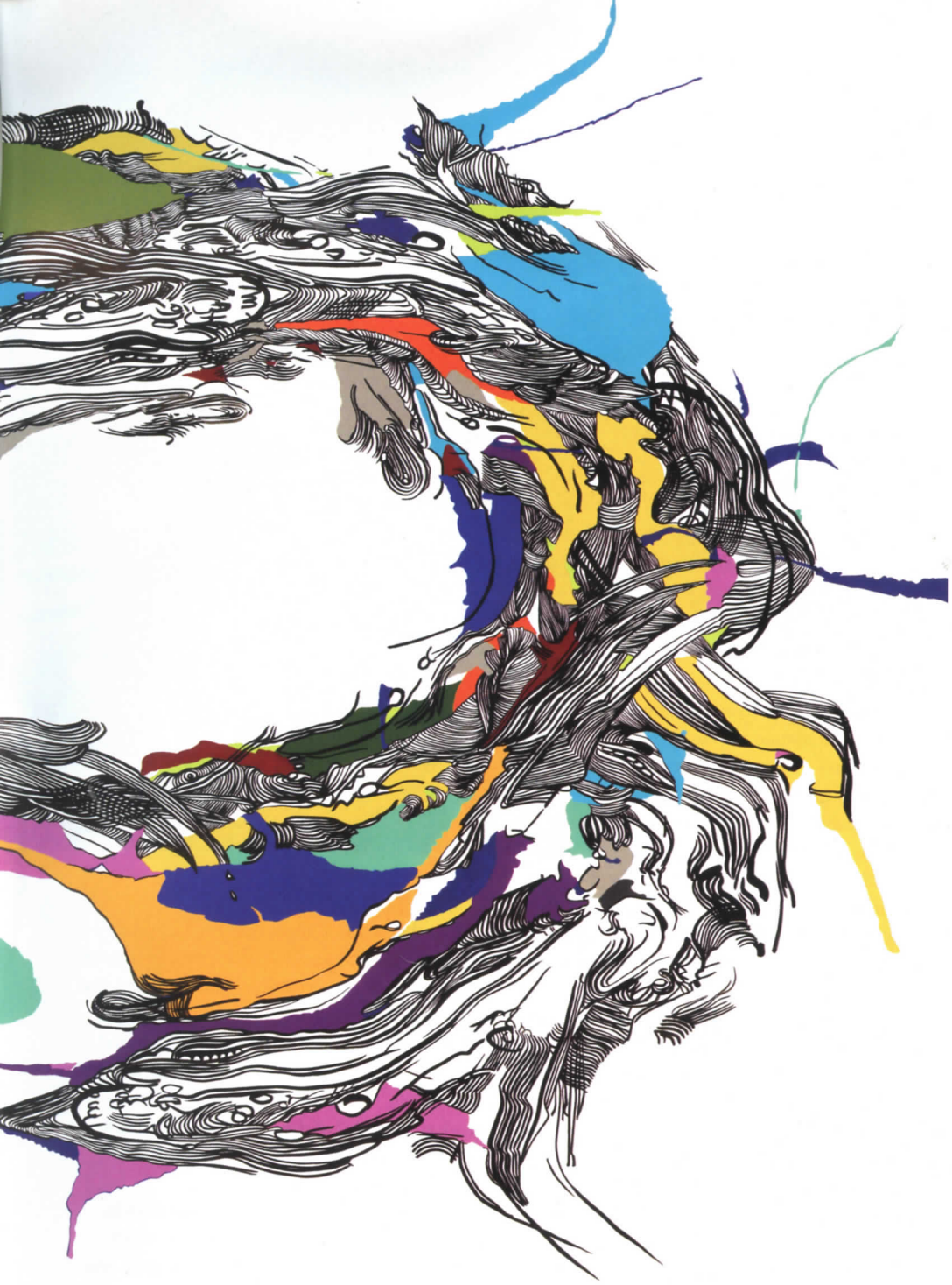
Going a bit further, Meg White, director of Gallery NAGA, says that the gallery is far more than an art showroom. It's a place where art lovers can actually talk to someone who's knowledgeable and eager to discuss the work. "Unlike a museum, we're always available to talk to our audience," she says. "We're free and open to the public. Anyone can come in."

Gallery NAGA has been situated in the neo-Gothic, stone Church of the Covenant on Newbury Street since 1977. It focuses on regional, contemporary artists—mainly paintings, but also studio furniture, sculpture and photography.

"We see the gallery as being on the ground," says White, who admits she's always looking for new artists. "We're at the beginning of seeing work coming out of the schools. By the time it gets to museums and other venues, it probably started in a local gallery."

A good example is Sophia Ainslie. Born in Johannesburg, she moved to Boston 10 years ago and teaches at Northeastern University. She creates bold, highly gestural work juxtaposed with color blocking. White met her at Kingston Gallery, and Ainslie followed up by attending a number of Gallery NAGA events. Soon she became part of the gallery, and now opens her second solo show there, *Pata Pata*, on September 8.

"Our role is to nurture—helping talent grow and bring it out," says White. "That happens by seeing the work in the artist's studio. We give candid feedback. After the work comes down and the show is over, we talk with the artist about how do you think this went and where do you see the work going? We'll ask, do you want to go to New York? Do you want museum shows? Some artists have clear ideas about where



Left: Sophia Ainslie, *In Person—Montserrat*, 2014, flashe, acrylic paint and India ink on polypropylene, 77 x 53". Photo: Stewart Clements.

they want to go. If we have contacts, we'll often reach out and make a connection. It's good for everyone if the artist has other venues."

In Brunswick, ME, Duane Paluska, has been running ICON Contemporary Art for 27 years. Situated in a Federalist home, built in 1820, the setting is similar to the homes of many of Paluska's customers. Seventy percent are artists.

"I think most of the buying and looking public don't completely make their decisions on their own tastes. It's a little bit of a community response," he says.

In fact, he's known for having a good eye in selecting art, and people look up to him as an authoritative art guide. He compares this kind of expertise to "a doctor who is associated with a certain hospital and an architect who's part of a certain firm." Paluska says, "The gallery enjoys a similar reputation in the community, and an artist who shows here, even once, profits from that identity. They can't get that on their own."

Not only does Anni Mackay of BigTown Gallery, Rochester, VT, agree, but adds, "It's important to the public that there is a tastemaker, someone who is intellectually compatible with them, who is willing to stick their neck out for them. A gallery owner is most effective in catalyzing the interests of people who are really curious."

Mackay has been running BigTown for 12 years and now represents 40 artists. After reading Edward Winkleman's book, *How to Start and Run a Commercial Art Gallery*, she initiated book readings and artists' talks. Recently she formed a nonprofit to support gallery events and performances, because she finds artists enjoy being with other artists, be they authors, musicians or puppeteers.

"This doesn't necessarily create collectors, but it creates support for everyone," she says. "There's a synergy. I believe it's very important to cultivate a community of like-minded individuals to help stimulate the gallery."

Surprisingly, of the gallerists interviewed for this article, none exhibit at or attend art fairs, although several said that they would like to attend, but with booths costing $15,000 and more, plus travel, shipping, insurance and myriad other costs, they worry it could push their galleries into the red.

Consistently, they see their role as art leaders, selectively choosing artists and creating a market around them. People come to the gallery, because it has a reputation for handling excellent artists and it's an opportunity to socialize with like-minded people.

However, the key reason galleries are needed is harder to define. Dealers consistently point to the intangible connection collectors make with the art—an understanding that is cultivated by the gallery. "I open up like a sunflower. The art is color. It's all optic energy," says Walker, who describes just some of the emotions she feels when she looks at art that really moves her. "It's almost like falling in love."

Ultimately this is what she is selling, and to that she adds, "That's what is lost when artists try to do it themselves." ■

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