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### Somerhill Gallery's new location shows art alive and accessible

Jul 20, 2008

Somerhill Gallery has moved to downtown Durham in what gallery owner Joe Rowand describes as "what was once the wrong side of the tracks." Just one turn off the Durham Freeway, Somerhill opened to a distinct feeling that trumpets were blaring and Durham's angels were smiling overhead.

As you walk from space to space, the experience of the miracle of art is everywhere almost drowning out the featured artist, Richard Pratt. To its credit, however, Pratt's art stood up against the competition of live music, marvelous food, champagne and a crowd of art lovers who were as busy seeing and being seen as they were inspecting the art.

This night, however, was not Pratt's or any of the other artists in the Somerhill stable; this night belonged to Rowand, impresario extraordinaire. As he stood at the door, greeting each guest as if they were the only ones who had come, the stress of the past months had washed away and the genial, relaxed entrepreneur had returned.

Those of us who keep up with the Triangle art scene know that Rowand's last years at his Chapel Hill Eastgate location have been marked by disasters. His gallery was flooded in one of our many freak storms and his legal battles with the landlords over his damages lasted for years. Then, when things seemed to be returning to normal, he was served notice that his lease was up and he had 60 days to move. He had to decide where to relocate. After looking in Chapel Hill, he began to entertain ideas about downtown Durham. Going out of business was never an option.

He found the Venable Center location, took a fast trip to New York with his friend and architect, Philip Szostak, to check out the galleries and armed with what they saw and their own ideas they started to work. The results are super.

Although the entrance is unprepossessing, (The structure was built in 1952 as the shipping and receiving warehouse for Venable Tobacco.) Bill Secunda's welded steel bear, "Big Jim," stands guard, promising a whole new world just inside the doors. It is the light that makes it so wonderful--40 skylights open up the 9,000 square feet of space. Rowand's office is toward the back where his beloved Bouviers des Flandres loll about, the storage areas are open so visitors can poke through the bins and a beautiful open-air glassed-in sculpture atrium accents the entire experience. The gallery is an elegant bazaar of fine crafts, handmade jewelry, art glass, sculpture and paintings; it is a place where art is alive and accessible, not stuffy and forbidding.

Pratt, the featured artist, is new to the Somerhill family and this is his first solo show there. He told me he had been communicating with the gallery for several years with encouraging comments from Rowand. In January, with a new series just completed, he had a call inviting him to do a show for Somerhill. He agreed and then the bottom fell out for the gallery. Rowand said the month they had chosen was going to be a problem, because he had to move and did not know how long it would take. Could Pratt wait? Pratt could and so his opening

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