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With artists from afar, White River Junction galleries bring the outside in



Photographed on Sept. 2, 2021, Heidi Conner and Chad Etting opened their gallery, Tourist, in White River Junction, Vt., in January 2021 and have held monthly shows with openings during the town's First Friday events. Due to their full-time jobs at Dartmouth College, the couple's gallery is open on weekends. (Valley News - Geoff Hansen) Copyright Valley News. May not be reprinted or used online without permission. Send requests to permission@vnews.com. valley news photographs — Geoff Hansen

Chad Etting and Heidi Conner current show, "Under Press" reprinted or used online wi

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At tonight's First Friday receptions in White River Junction, a pair of recently opened galleries will do something local art viewers don't often see.

Both Tourist, a gallery on South Main Street that opened in January (<https://www.touristvt.net/>), and Kishka Gallery & Library, which opened this summer (<https://www.vnews.com/White-River-Junction-gallery-marries-art-and-books-40767629>) on Gates Street, are exhibiting works by artists from far beyond the Upper Valley.

For a show titled "Under Pressure," Tourist has gathered four artists who hail from Hartford, Conn.; Bayonne, N.J.; Cincinnati; and New York City.

Meanwhile, Kishka is opening "He Loves Me Not," a show of masks (<https://kishka.org/Lakea-Shepard>) by North Carolina artist Lakea Shepard.

The intent, the operators of both galleries said, is to exhibit a diversity of art for the benefit of local and regional viewers. But these shows also suggest the extent to which the Upper Valley is part of a broader art community and the influence of social media networking on how gallerists choose what to exhibit.

"I always say that we're interested in artists that are regional but not local, because I think it is important to bring artists into the conversation," said Chad Etting, who opened Tourist with his wife, Heidi Conner. "We are trying to expand what's offered in the Upper Valley."

Etting, 37, is originally from Connecticut and is an artist himself. His studies have taken him to France, and he has exhibited in Europe and New England. Conner, 34, grew up in Chelsea and graduated from The Sharon Academy. The couple live in Lebanon, and both have administrative jobs at Dartmouth College.

Opening a gallery has been Etting's plan for a while. He enjoys the process of putting together a show, from identifying artists and visiting their studios to hanging the show and opening it to viewers.

"It's like it takes on a whole new life in the gallery," Etting said this week.

But showing artists' work "connects us to other artists and their networks," he said.

Part of that is internet-based. If Etting or Conner contact an artist through the gallery's Instagram account, the artist can look through the photographs of the gallery and the shows it's already mounted and get the sense that it's a serious enterprise. And the internet provides the gallery with a broader constituency than it could have in White River Junction alone.

"It's interesting, we have generated sales through Instagram as well as through the retail setting," Conner said.

To set up the new show at Kishka, co-owner Ben Finer reached out to Lakea Shepard in May, also through Instagram.

Finer, who grew up in Norwich and now lives in Hartford Village, is an artist with a longtime interest in masks. He'd been following Shepard's work through social media. He said he's "in the habit of contacting people that I don't know because I comment on their work on Instagram."

This might be generational, Finer said. He's in his early 40s, not much older than Etting and squarely in the generation that adopted the internet as teens and young adults.

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"Platforms like Facebook and Instagram have gotten us into the routine of seeing other peoples' lives from far away," Finer said.

As an Upper Valley native, Finer can see the value in showing artists from distant places.

“I guess I just go back to being that kid at Hanover High” who was hungry to see new art, he said. “We would love to be a place where you see something that blows that kid’s mind.”

Upper Valley venues already do that, of course. The Hood Museum of Art presents a global survey; AVA Gallery and Art Center shows the best of visual art in New Hampshire and Vermont; and smaller galleries occupy niches of their own. Finer said the Main Street Museum, which has led the way in White River Junction for many years, made him say, “Whoa!” when he was just out of college.

So at Tourist, a viewer can have her mind blown by Alberto Casais, a self-taught painter and tattoo artist who grew up in the industrial city of Brunswick, N.J., and who paints every day. Or by the photographs of Stephen Barker, who was written up recently by Hilton Als on *The New Yorker’s* website.

Shepard, whose work is on view at Kishka (<https://kishka.org/Lakea-Shepard>), deploys traditional African weaving, beading and basketry techniques to make elaborate, colorful masks and headgear, some of which is inspired by “slave masks,” metal masks that slaves were forced to wear.

“This series of head sculptures is dedicated to one of the most misunderstood groups of people: Black men,” Shepard writes in her artist’s statement. “Rather than shackling metal to their faces, I’ve carefully constructed masks, encrusted using semi-precious stones with healing properties.”

A native of Winston-Salem, N.C., Shepard was the lone African American studying in the Crafts Department (<http://www.lakeashepard.com/about>) at the College for Creative Studies, from which she graduated in 2013. She is soon to have a show at the Contemporary Art Museum of Raleigh.

Despite the seriousness of their intent, the operators of Tourist and Kishka are doing their best not to take themselves too seriously. The approachable names of the two galleries are signifiers.

“I wanted a one-word name that’s not related to art,” Etting said. It’s meant to say, “Come by and take a look,” and so far, people are approaching it in that spirit.

Tourist is open for First Friday from 6 to 8 p.m. but will stay open as long as visitors are milling around. “Under Pressure” is on view through Sept. 18.

Kishka holds a reception from 5 to 8 p.m. for “He Loves Me Not,” which is on view through Sept. 26.

Exhibitions canceled

Three shows of work by Vermont painter Paul Gruhler have been canceled by new COVID-19 precautions.

The exhibitions, at the Vermont Supreme Court and the Vermont Arts Council’s Spotlight Gallery in Montpelier, and in the Gallery at Central Vermont Medical Center in Berlin, were due to open Sept. 17 (<https://www.vnews.com/Art-Notes-Courtyard-Theatre-at-Northern-Stage-has-some-staying-power-42012153>) in conjunction with the publication of a new catalog of Gruhler’s work. All three shows have been called off, Gruhler said in an email Thursday.

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