

AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

Les Fleurs du Mal : Did you know that you were going to start a gallery when you moved into your space?

Annette: Well, we were looking for a big space essentially to live and work in. I think in the back of all our minds we were thinking if it's big enough and if it's reasonable enough we were going to start a gallery.

Gerik: And the landlord was actually cool with us living in it.

Jamie: We actually got a lot of help from the landlord, not financially or physically. But he was, like: look, you're not supposed to live here but you can live here, and you can do whatever you want with the space.

Carrie: But we also moved into a raw space. Everything came out of our pockets — all building materials, electrical renovations.

LFDm: How'd you hit on the idea?

Annette: Cincinnati [where we attended art school] was a big influence, 'cause there's more of a tradition there to start up your own space. It's really cheap to do that. There are a lot of underground or alternative spaces ... and I always thought really that the art scene in Cincinnati was really good for that.

The unfortunate thing is that it's in the Midwest so it's in a kind of cultural hole where nothing gets out of it or makes an influence on the rest of the world.

LFDm: So, you have the motivation of the group, you have six incomes, and everybody has their free time to contribute...

Carrie: Well that's cause we live there, so it's like, after we get home from work, we

work more. That's your studio space!

Jamie: Yeah, it's not like we have to go out to go work on a project. Like, it's there.

Carrie: Staring at you in the face!

Nick: And if someone else is working, you feel guilty for not working. [laughter]

Jamie: We have screenprinting in there, a sewing studio, industrial machines.

Nick: Carrie and Gerik and Elsa sew for a living. And Jamie screenprints.

Gerik: Carrie and I sew for a living. Carrie has her own business called "Fabric Horse" — and she does a lot of independent contracted work. Elsa is a designer for Urban Outfitters; she makes mock-ups of all the clothing, so she has to do a lot of sewing.

LFDm [to Annette and Nick]: What do you do for a living?

Annette: I'm teaching clay classes, and just recently helped install a show. And I'd worked for Urban Outfitters; I've gone from job to job a lot.

Nick: There's a great place in Philadelphia called the Fabric Workshop and Museum. They do a lot of screenprinting there — textiles, they have 25-yard tables. I'm a print fellow there. The rest of the week I'm assistant creative director to a clothing company. Carrie, Nick and I run our own respective businesses out of the same space as the Black Floor. So, it's all like right next to one another and crammed up against each other.

LFDm: How did you start off finding work to exhibit?

Annette: Well, we wanted to start this quickly, so we started off with a concept

Black Floor Gallery members speak about doing it on their own in Philadelphia. Gerik Forston, Carrie Collins, Jamie Dillon, Nick Paparone, Elsa Shadley and Annette Monnier own and operate Philadelphia's Black Floor Gallery. Young artists, either recently graduated or still in art school, the group founded the gallery a little over a year ago. The Black Floor crew was in Montreal this past January for a talk and panel discussion on alternative approaches to curation organized by the VAV, Concordia University's undergraduate art gallery. Ed Janzen interviewed Forston, Collins, Dillon, Paparone and Monnier for LFDm about their work and experiences.

for our first show. We had to make sure we got a lot of people from Philadelphia into the gallery. We figured a group show was the best way to do that, straight off the bat.

But what I was kind of interested in doing was having more solo shows, 'cause I feel that there's not a lot of venues for young artists. Most people start off by being in a bunch of group shows and sometimes never get shows by themselves. But the first show was a group show and we asked everyone to make posters and t-shirts. That's a prevalent thing in Philadelphia — a lot of artists are into screenprinting, making t-shirts, making posters, [so we asked] a lot of artists from the area and from other places to make a poster for our gallery.

LFDm: Do you have a mandate that you try to fulfill?

Gerik: We like a lot of installation-based work, something that pushes media.

We've only had one drawing show, just one print show. And while we really appreciate that stuff, we're leaning towards sculpture or installation. But that's not to say that if someone sends us amazing paintings we're not going to show them.

Annette: I think it really mirrors the art world right now. You might be able to point out little pockets of things, here and there, where people are actually working in a style. For the most part it's pretty individualistic. People are going off in all different directions making all different things. And so we don't pare it down to a set style.

LFDm: Have there been any stand-outs? Any things you've been par-

ticularly pleased with?

Gerik: The first thing that comes to mind for me is the Sabrina Lessard show, which was by far the most minimal show that we've had. It was just one large, life-sized cast of a double bed, with sheets and pillows on it. And that was the only thing in the entire gallery.

Carrie: A flat black bed on a flat black floor, with white walls. And she also did a sound installation as well. She interviewed a bunch of people about their experiences in a bed, about their idea of what a bed was — sleep, good experiences, bad experiences — and that was playing, looping.

Jamie: We all like different things, too, so when we decide what we're gonna have for a show there's usually an argument — yes and no and yes and no — and then we'll come to an agreement.

LFDm: Basically consensus.

Gerik: Yeah, basically everybody has to agree on having a show to have a show. It can't be a majority vote.

LFDm: Do you get a lot of proposals?

Carrie: Every day.

Gerik: At least two or three a week.

LFDm: And how many shows do you do — say, one a month?

Gerik: Once a month.

Jamie: But I think as far as proposals, we've only given one person a show from a proposal.

Annette: I think you're always more impressed if you see the work in person first or you've talked to the person first. It's really hard to get an idea just seeing

someone's work through the Internet. It's very alienating.

LFD: How have people in Philadelphia received the place?

Gerik: It's been an extremely fast process of getting ourselves known. It's a small, tight-knit arts community, and at our very first opening we had the art-museum director and the director at the contemporary art museum, too. And you know, that kind of thing would never happen in a place like New York.

Carrie: We're also failing to mention that we had a Shepard Fairey show at the gallery [Ed. note: the creator of the iconic "Obey Giant" images].

Annette: And as soon as we did that, we actually made some money — like for the first time ever!

Gerik: The outcome of that show worked out really well in our favor. It put us on the map. I mean, it gave us so much local press, we were actually getting even people weren't even really that much into art.

Nick: That was a crazy show, though, 'cause we had, like, \$45,000 worth of artwork shipped to us.

Carrie: And the opposite of it is the artist showing up in their car, their small car with all their artwork.

Jamie: Yeah, that's what we're used to. And then this guy ... you gotta deal with accounting...

Annette: Contracts...

Gerik: Insurance...

Carrie: We had to sign things...

Gerik: It was a huge learning experience. We were kinda skeptical about doing that show initially because of that stuff; we weren't trying to be a commercial space. We wanted people who haven't really gotten to be seen enough, yet — to allow people to show in Philadelphia who'd never shown there before.

Carrie: Then we figured: Why not? And Shepard — when he began, that's what he was.

Gerik: If we could have just one Shepard

Fairey-esque show a year, and just make a few thousand dollars to pay for...

Annette: I don't think it's going to happen.

Gerik: That's our goal — once a year! [laughter]

LFD: Where do you see your project going in the future?

Jamie [amidst general confusion]: Everybody still wants to do it, as far as I know. I know I still want to do it. But then there's this question of the chaos of living with six people — and then getting older, and you're living in a room that's nine feet by ten feet, and you have to cram every single thing that you own into that.

LFD: You mentioned bunk beds yesterday...

Jamie: Lofts, more like. And the place is always dirty...

Carrie: Do you want to have a nice grown-up apartment someday, or do you always want to live in a college dorm?

Gerik: And have a stove and a refrigerator that works?

Jamie: There're those questions. But there're options where we can turn the space into studios and rent them out, and [still] have the gallery. Or we can go for non-profit status and somehow get a grant to pay for the rent and running up the space with studios. But we're going to keep the gallery. We could always move spots, but it's kind of pointless to move spots after having to build the whole thing.

Annette: I think what's interesting, too ... here [in Canada] I've talked to several people about how their artist-run spaces are run, and everyone sort of knows how to get the grants and the funding, and it seems a lot more humanistic that way. Whereas there're several steps that we're all iffy on, and like even if you talk to someone who tried to get non-profit status before, they just say it's confusing and they're not really sure.

LFD: In the U.S., are the people who give out the grants artists themselves? Cause here, the arts councils...

Gerik: No, no — they're bureaucrats.

Annette: That's not true, though, 'cause I know the Ohio arts council is run by artists.

LFD: So it's different state-by-state, then.

Gerik: It is different state-by-state. I know Ohio gives out more than everybody else.

LFD: What are the most challenging or difficult parts of this whole experience?

[In unison]: Living together!

LFD: Doesn't sound like a lot of privacy.

Carrie: The only private place you have is your bedroom.

Gerik: But the most problems arise there because things happen like dirty dishes in the sink for weeks.

Nick: Or you're in a bad mood and you have to talk to everybody.

Jamie: Someone's hammering and you're trying to concentrate on writing something. And the way the space is arranged is all our rooms are crammed together and all our studios are crammed together.

LFD: So, it's kind of a sweatshop in a way!

[laughter]

Nick: Another thing I think is interesting is we actually live with this artwork for a whole month. So you wake up, you walk by it...

Jamie: You see it every day!

Nick: ...you take a shower, you walk out, you see it, you eat, you see it.

LFD: What are some reactions of yours to the art after you've lived with it for...

Nick: Some of it I just get so sick of — I

won't name any names! — but you just look at it and ... "I want these things out!"

Gerik: But then sometimes you don't wanna see it go, you just wish it could stay here forever — sometimes the art is just so good. Yeah, it just totally depends.

LFD: If you heard of some people who were going to do something like this, would there be anything you'd want to say to them?

Annette: I would say be sure to trust the people you're doing it with.

Nick: Make sure they are people who are willing to work, who are like, let's do this — now!

Gerik: We've met people who have attempted it and fallen short because the people they were getting into it with would lose their interest, or something would come up and they'd be, like, "Well, I can't do it anymore."

Annette: And you have to be prepared to put your money and your physical body on the line. And other than that I suggest not thinking about it too much.

Gerik: If you think about it too much, you're not going to do it!

Annette: Just know, too, that you can do all of it. And if you can't, you know somebody who does. They're gonna help you out.

Nick: I think overall none of us regret it!

Gerik: Do it 'cause you want to do it, not because there's some kind monetary reward or fame, or anything like that. Just do it cause you love it and you love art, and you want other people to see art, and you want to open up the space for that to happen.