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Creative Communities: Brandon's 'creative spark'

The artistic vision of painter Warren Kimble is blossoming in the Vermont town of Brandon where established and newer artists collaborate to create a 'cooperative community'

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BRANDON — The Chronicles took the stage on a late August night to perform a set of funkified jazz. The stage was a cleared-out section of floor in the upstairs of a converted barn. The barn had been through a couple conversions: dairy barn to painting studio to tearoom. A tearoom, that is, with recorded classical music playing as you sip tea and eat scones.

This evening, the racks of classical music discs and teapots were set aside at Brandon Music, a record label/eatery/performance space. The shades were drawn in the barn's loft and six musicians opened their set for an audience of the same size: Six.

"It's the way the cookie crumbles," Bryan Brundige, leader of the Albany-based Chronicles, said before his set. "We have to evolve our sound to the site, and to the audience."

It was the group's first gig in a converted barn, he said. "But we have played in a barn."

A few miles away, in a gazebo on the Brandon green, long-haired musicians serenaded the locals. The Avant Garde Dogs, a solid rock outfit, performed for scores of people and a bunch of dogs, too. The crowd milled around amiably, chatting with friends till the music stopped about 8:30 — curtain call in this Rutland County town between Middlebury and Rutland.

"There seems to have been a little bit of a renaissance in Brandon," said Jim Keating, singer and lead guitar player with the Avant Garde Dogs, one of three bands he plays with. Keating, 60, has lived in Brandon for 12 years, and in the area another 25 or so.

"It's concurrent with a revitalization of businesses," Keating said, noting the year-old downtown bar, Center Bar, where his band gigs.

"It's not Burlington," Keating said. "But that's fine with us."

Warren Kimble: a 'catalyst' for Brandon's blooming arts community

The new and old share the limelight in Brandon, where long-established artists — most notably painter Warren Kimble — are working and living alongside a newer wave of art makers. "It's wonderful to live in a town where there's creative spark," Kimble, 77, said. "That's very important to quality of life."

Artists talk about the area's affordability, physical beauty, and supportive community — in particular the Brandon Artists Guild — describing what makes Brandon an interesting and appealing place to be an artist.

"It's just a phenomenon," said Fran Bull, 74, who studied painting at Bennington College and works in painting, printmaking and sculpture. "I think probably it began with the spirit and the energy and the in-the-trenches work of Warren Kimble. He had a vision to bring the artists together and then support them by opening the Brandon Artist Guild."

Charles Powell, 64, moved to Brandon almost seven years ago from Virginia Beach, Va. Powell and his husband, TV writer and glass artist Steven Zorn purchased — as it happens — the onetime gallery of Kimble, a brick warehouse along the river. There is a patio overlooking the falls, a wonderfully renovated apartment, and a storefront with a home furnishings/object store. The business, called 4 Conant Interiors, is tailored to Vermont tastes, Powell said.

"We have a huge following in Brandon," Powell said, "and that's only because we do our best to find beautiful pieces that have great utility that we can sell at an accessible price."

With his designer's eye considering the aesthetic of his adopted hometown — trying to discern its source of beauty — Powell identifies "the people."

"I want you to know that the beauty of Brandon came be found in its people," Powell said. "I have never seen a lovelier collection of people than in Brandon. The people are the heart and soul of Brandon. They're the glue ... There's a zeitgeist that brings all of these interesting people to town. "

He, too, calls Kimble the "catalyst." "When anyone thinks of Brandon, they think of Warren Kimble," Powell said. "Warren certainly was the catalyst. Now it has grown far, far in excess of Warren. I'm amazed at how much energy the artists put into that town."

'They call me the cheerleader of Brandon'

Kimble has worked and lived in Brandon for more than 40 years. Best known for his iconic images of Vermont landscapes and structures — images that can be found on mugs and pillows as well as canvases — Kimble also makes contemporary art.

His studio/gallery display Kimble's two artistic sides, both of which are important to him, he said. "I love doing both," Kimble said.

He explores contemporary art every year at the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, where a month away from the demands of everyday life and time spent with other artists is a gift, Kimble said.

"Art is a total of one's experiences," Kimble said. "And so being there, at the Studio Center, is a concentrated experience. Every time I go there, something new happens. It's because of letting

your mind and your creative spirit go. You're freer."

Kimble, who has had a solo exhibit at the Shelburne Museum, recognizes his role as a central figure in the artistic renaissance of Brandon. "They call me the cheerleader of Brandon," he laughs. He, in turn, points to BAG as a unifying and supportive factor in the local arts scene. He has watched the arts grow "bigger and broader" during his decades in Brandon.

"It's wonderful because we're a cohesive group," Kimble said. "We're having fun. We enjoy each other's company. We enjoy each other's work. There's a working together to complete projects, and an enthusiasm that comes from that."

Brandon Artists Guild hatches 10th 'community arts project'

The guild has about 50 exhibiting members, artists who are admitted to BAG through a juried process. The organization is known for its annual fundraising event, a public art expo in its 10th year.

The first one, with its parade of painted pigs, raised more than \$100,000 for the Brandon Artists Guild, according to BAG. The guild supports arts scholarships and programs, and organizes occasional artists' salons, with critiques, demonstrations and discussions.

Members describe the annual fundraiser as a "community arts project" that focuses attention on arts in Brandon, fosters community spirit and draws people to town.

"We have people from all over the country who want to know what our community art project is about," said Maggie Boise, a jeweler who helped organized this year's event.

The theme of the 2012 community arts project is "What's Hatching in Vermont?" Artists have donated bird-related work that is for sale, proceeds to benefit the guild.

Boise grew up in Proctor and lived in Nashville for 10 years before returning to Rutland County in 2002. She and her family settled in Brandon, where she started to make earrings.

"We chose Brandon because it had a nice feel," Boise said. "It was a comfortable community. It seemed like things were happening. The town had a bit of energy to it. What I discovered was a lot of really talented, humble individuals with a very diverse offering for arts here in Brandon."

Judith Reilly, a fabric artist, became a painter for the public art project: spreading her wings to make a bird-themed image using paint. "When someone hands you an Adirondack chair and says we want it back, I'm not going to cover it in fabric."

Working with other artists gives her the freedom and support to try new things, to take certain artistic risks, she said.

An inspiring landscape and a 'cooperative community'

Reilly moved to Brandon in 2004, having come to the area for vacations since 1955. She was raised on a farm in the Hudson Valley, and calls herself a “life-taught artist.” She thought she’d buy an old farmhouse on a dirt road. Reilly was astonished to discover the house she came to look at was on U.S. 7 in downtown Brandon.

"Staring at it I had an epiphany," Reilly said. "I could open a gallery." This is what she did in her 200-year-old house. In the surrounding community, she found artists who share an aesthetic — one marked by its generosity of spirit, Reilly said.

"Everyone's here to do what their heart tells them to do," Reilly said. "Everyone here is trying to help you do that. It's such a cooperative community ... The words 'vested interest' are really important in this community. You want to make it better."

Rebecca Zelis, a Rhode Island School of Design-trained jeweler, was starting her family when she and her husband moved to Vermont eight years ago from Chicago. With two young kids, Zelis and her husband wanted to be closer to family, and her parents live in Mount Holly.

They settled in Brandon for the artistic community they found there, and because they could afford to buy a house, Zelis said. Brandon fit one other criteria: Zelis and her family could walk to the store and the bank and the bakery.

Zelis has a studio and gallery space, Adornments, on Center Street. At a work bench at the back of the space, Zelis makes jewelery from stones she (and her kids) find on the beach. Many of the stones she works with are from Lake Champlain. They are altered neither in shape, color or texture in the process of her jewelry-making, Zelis said. Her work involves setting the stones in sterling silver, and sometimes adding a gem or a bit of a found object — like a rusty beer cap.

"I like the idea of taking what nature made, and by setting it in stone you have a closer look," Zelis said. "If they were just pebbles in the ground, you wouldn't look that close."

Artists wander in and out of her studio, Zelis said, bringing with them support, a sense of community —and sometimes found objects that might be of interest to her.

"You're not an anomaly," Zelis said. "You're not the odd artist ... You make your living as an artist. We work for what we have."