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A network of their own

By John E. Mitchell, North Adams Transcript
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ADAMS -- Greylock Arts seized on untapped artistic territory when they opened up shop last year -- if the town of Adams feels lucky to have the venue, it may not know just how much luck actually played into it.

"We drove through Adams by accident trying to get to North Adams," said co-owner Matthew Belanger. "We didn't really know where we were driving through, but we were so charmed by Adams."

Along with partner Marianne Petit, Belanger took up residence on Summer Street, with the plan, now realized, of using the ground floor -- a storefront space -- as an art gallery. So far, the featured works have centered on technology, pulling from the pair's connections with New York University's Interactive Tele-communications Program, from which both are graduates and Petit is a teacher. The gallery got plenty of attention for featuring such works as a solar-powered bikini and LED firefly jars.

ITP is integral to their lives, how they met and their views on connecting and networking. In many ways, ITP is where it all began.

"I was studying printmaking and etching and my mother came and said 'You know, I think these computers are going to be important,'" said



Petit, "and she had cut out from the New York Times a page ad that SVA had

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an intensive computer workshop, like Apple IIe computers, and so I went to it and that was it, it changed everything, and I found ITP."

After graduating from ITP, Petit worked for nonprofits in the field of community-based technology for a number of years before returning to the program as a teacher, a position she maintains by shuttling between Adams and New York City. She currently teaches classes in digital media and animation, as well as collective storytelling. Petit also

oversees the technology and social justice curriculum, which works with youth organizations, as well as a curriculum around assistive technology, which partners with pediatric and rehabilitation centers in order to hack technologies to be disability-friendly.

Belanger came to ITP in 2001, after leaving his native Arkansas to study photography in Boston. Once again, his future was the result of a coincidence -- an impromptu birthday visit to New York City had him meet some people who would reveal the existence of ITP. At the time, he was trying to figure out what to do next with his life and the unexpected introduction was fortuitous.

"It was my birthday and I wanted to do something crazy and drastic and un-planned," said Belanger, "so I got on a bus and went to New York. I had always been fearful of New York, just because, especially coming from a small city like Little Rock, anything larger than that is intimidating."

As fate would have it, Belanger moved to the city on Sept. 1, 2001, a week and a half before the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Strangely, there was a silver lining.

"If I was intimidated by New York beforehand, that was definitely a traumatic experience to have gone through within 10 days of moving there," said Belanger. "What I really found, and in the dramatic moment, being in an environment of people who had all started this new process in graduate school, we really bonded together."

The closeness included the faculty and the bond formed then would eventually lead to a post-graduation partnership for the two that still thrives and Adams is the beneficiary through their endeavor at Greylock Arts.

"Neither one of us has any interest in being a commercial galleryist whatsoever, neither one of us has a sales bone in our body," said Petit. "We just like that it gives us the opportunity to show stuff that isn't sellable or doesn't have that intent at all, give an opportunity for a lot of people we know who do this kind of work and don't have a place to exhibit it at all. There are not too many venues for this kind of work. We were very clear very early on that if we tried to have a commercial space, we would just only be disappointed, it just wouldn't work for us at all."

"We just decided to avoid that and create a space that could be whatever we wanted to be whenever we wanted it," said Belanger, "and since we are obviously interested in and connected to technology arts, that seemed like an obvious first show, though I don't think in the early days we saw ourselves as doing that exclusively, but it seemed obvious from the earliest of days that that could be our niche, that we could fill that pretty nicely."

Prior to opening a venue for art, the couple was constantly creating their own individual outputs. Petit has a vast body of work digital web comics and Flash animation -- like the long term, autobiographical projects "716" and "When I Was Three" -- as well as video and sculpture and various Web projects.

"The 'When the 'When I Was Three' series started in 2002, it was an opportunity to reinvent myself and analyze the things that were important to me," said Petit, "and I found that

stories were really important to me and memory was really important, that the things that I was drawn to that I really enjoyed wouldn't necessarily be things that would ever be shown in galleries, but the amount of artistry and craftsmanship behind them were really extraordinary. I just decided at that point to make things that interested me."

Belanger's photography work has ranged from documentary and street photography to more experimental ventures, such as one project that had him pointing his digital camera at a TV and taking a picture every minute for a day. This yielded 1,440 smaller images that he edited together in a larger presentation. Belanger also worked on paintings from dirt, in which he fused a caveman sensibility with modern icons, like an iPod and an iMac. He also worked in documentary films and is currently devoted to an ongoing video project, "Raymundo Santiago," which follows a family of Mexican artisans that specializes in alebrijes sculptures.

"I've been working on this project for a number of years," said Belanger. "It's a never ending documentary that I plan to work on until the day I die."

Together Petit and Belanger have created stop-motion animation films and a Web site called "The Saddest Thing I Own," which they worked on with Eliza-beth Mikesell, started in 2006 and still updating.

"I had done this ritual to get things out of my house which were from a former life that I had just left at dog level so that they would destroy them," said Petit. "So I went out and took the dogs for a walk and left these things at different places where other people might be able to take them. At the time, Matt said 'You did that and I still have my prom corsage and that's the saddest thing I own.' I loved that expression so much that we started talking about what the saddest things you own are and the saddest things other people own and that kind of thing."

The Web site took off, gathering attention from Wired magazine and Canadian NPR thanks to its collection of personal tales built around the stories of objects.

"What really shocked us was that it took a tone that was very different," said Petit. "We never expected it to be a therapy site at all. It was really clear that people experience really sad things and they don't necessarily have a place to tell that particular story."

"One of the first days, one of the things we got was the ashes of a firstborn child, and so we had to come with a system of how we adequately deal with people's contributions in a way that is really respectful and responsive to them individually."

This project was done in conjunction with Turbulence, the organization that the team is currently collaborating with -- and partnering with MCLA Gallery 51 -- for the upcoming "Networked Realities: (Re)Connecting the Adamases," which will present interactive, simultaneous installations in two locations. Belanger is working with Ven Voisey and Sean Riley on that project. Looking ahead, the couple have an exhibit planned that's a little different for them -- landscapes -- but are planning a technological and interactive aspect to the show so that it is more than just paintings hanging on a wall.

One thread in many of the couple's endeavors has been networks, whether in installations in their gallery, creations at ITP or professional and personal connections they build through their gallery and other work. Another is the desire to tell stories, both their own and those of other people, and to do so through unconventional mediums, with unconventional storytellers, the type of which you might not usually see in an art gallery setting. It's nothing they planned on -- it's just one more happy accident in a series.

"We've been making it up as we go along," said Petit. "There are certain values that we have that are expressed in that, because I think that we have an interest in community, we have an interest in other peoples' stories, and Matt does documentary work and has always been interested in other people's stories and in non-fiction. We don't have a very traditional view of art and of artists at all and in general we find that a lot of the people that we really enjoy working with would probably put artist pretty low on their description of themselves, because they consider themselves a lot of other things as well."

"We both agree that the conversation of what is art and what isn't art is over and done with," said Belanger.

Greylock Arts can be found online at www.greylockarts.net. Marianne Petit's work can be seen at www.mrpelit.com.

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