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Alfa Art draws on variety

Gallery grows creatively

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NEW BRUNSWICK — A fusion of shape, color and purpose bursts within 1,000 square feet just off Church Street.

There, Michael Fenton's bright, evocative oil portraits mingle with Doreen Valenza's contemplative, multimedia collages. And on another of Alfa Art Gallery's white walls, Anthony Kirov's flushes of painted reverie link with gallery owner Vesselin Kourtev's broad mixed media impressions of New Brunswick.

But Alfa Art, opened in recent weeks by Kourtev and his wife, Galina Kourteva, is more than a gallery. It's also a space where artists and audiences can delve into the process that makes art.

Spectators, Kourteva said, "will participate in the creation (of art) and talk about it."

An open art studio series hosted by a rotating cast of exhibiting artists, including Kourtev, is designed to give visitors to the gallery insight into the how, what and why of art.

Kourteva said that Alfa also will host events that transcend art's sometimes fixed boundaries. Those will include music, literature, painting and craft techniques, such as those derived from antiquity by the Bulgarian-born and now Brooklyn-based silversmith Valentin Yotkov.

"Philosophically, this is an interdisciplinary gallery," said Fenton, who is based in Morris Plains and who met Kourtev and Kourteva about four years ago.

Dennis Benson, associate dean at Mason Gross School of the Arts, said that Alfa's mission dovetails nicely with the city's arts scene. Alfa's "multidisciplinary" approach to art, he said, "continues the process that's long been under way and is pretty developed" in New Brunswick.

Benson said that galleries at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, the Brodsky Center for Print and Paper, the Zimmerli Art Museum and, more recently, the Heldrich Hotel and the Rockoff Hall dormitory have featured works that explicitly address the intersection where, for instance, painting and theater, music and dance, or a combination of those genres meet.

"I think there's a great energy in New Brunswick, and each new entity that comes in is a welcome addition. It's not as if we're in competition with one another," said Benson. "A variety of approaches is a good thing."

Kourteva, in 1999, and Kourtev, in 2001, came to the United States from their native Bulgaria, she to pursue post-doctoral studies in molecular biology and he to continue painting. The couple settled in New Brunswick four years ago.

Alfa culminates Kourtev's aspiration to open an art studio/gallery that displays work by both emerging and established artists who work in several mediums.

"The dream is about to be realized," Fenton said during Alfa's opening reception, attended by dozens of friends, family and officials, including New Brunswick Mayor James Cahill and Nikolay Milkov, the Bulgarian consul general in New York City.

For Kourtev, whose work has been shown in Europe and Japan, the gallery gives him an opportunity to expose his art to newer audiences. For his next project, Kourtev intends to invoke his adopted hometown's newfound vitality, as well as its history.

He just might have to hint at his own role.

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Above left, soprano Anna Veleva performs an aria during the grand opening of Alfa Art Gallery at 108 Church St. on Tuesday. Above right, Diana Liktor and Endre Biro of Oregon, who were visiting the New Brunswick area after a 14-year absence, admire some of the work on display during the grand opening.

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