

Nearshore

MAGAZINE LIFE IN DETAILS

VOLUME 1 - ISSUE 1

"THE ART ISSUE"



Holding



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Nestled a few doors down from the electric Florida Theater in Downtown Jacksonville sits an unassuming space, literally and figuratively. If you weren't looking for it intently the matte grey façade might fade into the street noise of the Elbow District. Pausing a moment to peek into the windows however, it's impossible not to notice the draw and beauty of this raw yet vibrant building, housing an equally vibrant art gallery. Rough plywood still covers patches in the floor and the brick walls, uncovered after 50 years of near neglect, look as if they could all but crumble at the touch. This hidden gem is none other than The Space Gallery, one of the newest additions to Jacksonville's urban core.

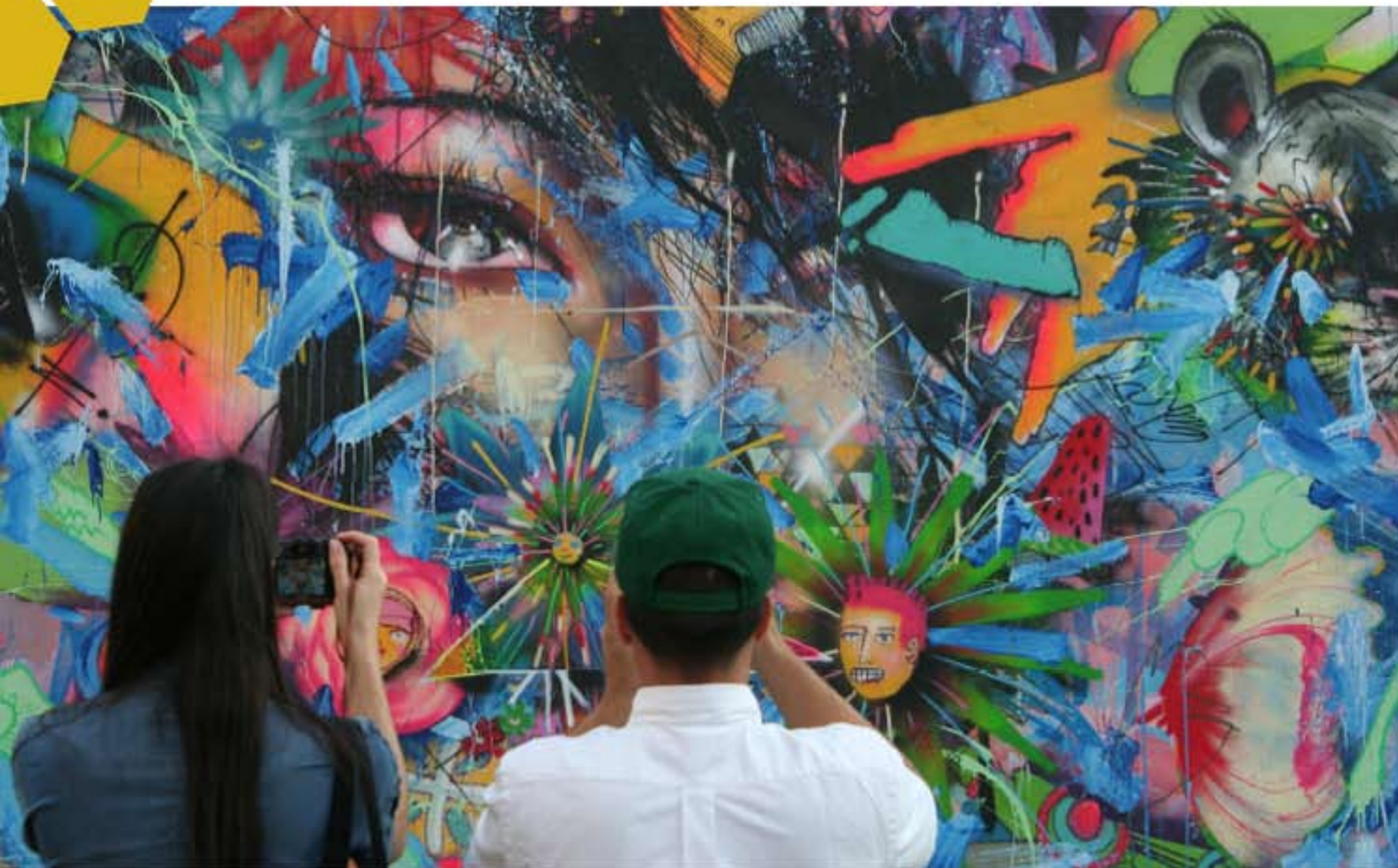
Margie Seaman, of Seaman Realty and Management Company, a powerhouse in commercial downtown real estate, currently manages the blank building at 120 E. Forsyth Street. When faced with the struggle of selling this somewhat forgotten locale Margie needed an outlet to showcase everything the building and the neighborhood had to offer. Thankfully she had experience. Enter the Building Art Program.

Margie started her business in New York 25 years ago in Long Island City, Queens. Her job was to market old historic buildings for adaptive reuse and ultimately convince local office tenants to relocate to these former forgotten industrial buildings. She soon found that there existed a robust art community living around and working in many of these buildings. By giving these artists an opportunity to show their work for free inside the very spaces she was trying to sell she created a win-win situation for all parties involved.

"The artists didn't have the funds to pay for gallery space and by using these buildings they were able to show unseen work for the first time. The landlords would get a cosmetic fix up for their space by showcasing the artwork on the walls, and the tenants got a new amenity in the building. As a broker I had new talking points that would make an otherwise uncomfortable building seem more wonderful and magical" says Margie. "Everyone was thrilled and the buildings no longer looked haunted." Margie called this movement the Building Art Program (Through the Building Art Program the gallery tenants maintain the space until it sells, at which point they have a 30-day vacate waiver, moving on to the next location).

After relocating to Jacksonville, Florida 8 years ago, Margie found much of the same environment that she had worked with in Long Island City. Jacksonville was, and still is, full of old historic buildings waiting for adaptive reuse. "These buildings are full of charm and magic but a lot of people don't see it or have the imagination to see what the building could be. I decided to reconceive the Building Art Program here in Jacksonville."

The Space Gallery thus became the inaugural gallery for the new initiative downtown. 120 E.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Pedestrians take in the Wynwood Walls in Miami, FL during Art Basel 2016; Art Republic commissioned full scale murals throughout the urban core of

Foreyth Street is the historic location of the New York Steam Laundry, originally built in 1903. After sitting on the market for 2 years, Margie turned to Mike Langton, the owner of the building, who jumped on board with the BAP right away. Soon, Dave Storey, principle of a local company, Graphics Garage, created a sign that could be displayed on the structure. The Space Gallery moved in on October 1.

"I'm really hoping that (the Building Art Program) becomes a movement," says Margie. "I hope more real estate agents use the idea in other buildings. This sign not only means the owner and the landlord support the local artists but that they believe that their work should be seen. I am encouraging other landlords to do the same. It is a great equalizer for everyone involved." The Building Art Program is currently featured in three buildings throughout the urban core with more coming along the way.

Back inside Space you'll find Matthew Bennett along with his wife Laura and their business partner Wyatt Parlette. The trio formed a collaborative team and opened the gallery on a fierce love of the arts. Wyatt and Matthew are both artists while Laura is a retired Navy nurse. Though the dream of a gallery space was always there, BAP made it possible. "I got a message

from a friend that said Margie was starting this program" says Matthew. "I contacted her after hearing about it and she was so enthusiastic. I just happened to meet Wyatt right when this was coming about and he had heard about the project also." Soon the conversations were flowing and what started as a collection of what-ifs turned in to a brainstorm session full of "outrageous ideas." The group decided together to avoid the oft-used co-op style gallery in favor of a curated, exhibition-focused showcase like the type you find in LA or NYC art houses.

As with any new building there are hurdles to overcome and each owner will tell you something different. Time, the physical state of the structure – specifically the walls, and limited resources might have been enough to stop others, but as the boys will tell you, Laura was the cheerleader encouraging the project from the beginning. "This wasn't exactly what I was looking for," tells Matthew. "I was just looking for a place downtown with a studio and a show space and then this just fell in our lap. I say that, but it didn't feel like that at the time. Laura would say it was the power of intention." "She wouldn't let us cut corners," continued Wyatt.

Though Laura is not an artist herself, she explains her involvement as an evolution of understanding.



Jacksonville for their kickoff event this past fall; In Wynwood graffiti can be seen on every available surface, creating one of the largest street art districts in the country.

"There's a lot I didn't understand, and I still don't understand. A lot of terms I didn't know, but they have a lot of great ideas and typically even though they might not be well formed and I don't get them, I have learned to trust my husband over the years. We just need to go all in and get what we need to get and have great rapid ideas. They're creative people and I just guide it. There is something new everyday."

"I have been watching as an outsider what is going on in the art community and we have been talking for a while about moving down here. I just thought 'what an amazing opportunity to help build what is needed downtown and just be here for the artists,'" says Laura. "We're really not a money making venture. We put a big investment in this for the benefit of the artists and the community and hopefully karma will bring it back to us in the end. I think it is important that we keep moving. It's important for Jacksonville. It's important for the artists."

This community focus is what makes The Space Gallery so unique and so integral to the growth of the Jacksonville art movement. Split into two rooms, the galleries' first exhibition, "Holding Space," featured the art of numerous artists, Matthew and Wyatt among them, and included a video installation in the rear room.

Though not thematically the same, it is clear that all of the pieces work together as a whole. Soon after opening, the trio added the work of UNF graduating senior Ian Skinner, a sculpture artist, who chose the venue for his senior showcase. "It's been interesting to watch it grow," notes Matthew. "When we opened I thought 'this is awesome, we can't possibly do better.' Then Ian put his stuff in here and we realized we could."

As the exhibitions go on, the work featured in the gallery will primarily be that of local Jacksonville and Northeast Florida artists. Some of the exhibitions, like the upcoming February show, will be focused on a specific theme (in this case, human rights will be the focus of the February showcase) or on a specific style, like the currently running photography and figure drawing exhibits. Matthew, Wyatt and Laura have kept "Holding Space" on run for just under three months, but moving forward the pieces will change monthly. As they put it, the artists will have complete freedom to choose what they want to focus on.

"The way we set up this gallery, it feels that we're free in a way because we are temporary. We don't have any constraints here. There's no one telling us what to do, so we don't tell the artists what they can't do," explains Matthew. "We want this place to be a space that is first of all, very visual in how

the art is shown, but also inspiring to the artists of Jacksonville to think bigger. That's what we really want. There will be other BAP galleries that pop up but we wanted this one to have people walk in and go 'holy shit, that's what you can do.' We just want good art and to have it shown in a professional way that the city deserves."

For Wyatt, that means there may not always be a clear vision for the direct future. "Moving forward we want to focus on the space being occupied by 1 or 2 artists, with small shows but big bodies of work. Bigger ideas. We are willing to put that trust in people that in the end trust us. For an artist, that's the best thing in the world when you have that. It's always like 'I have to see this and this.' We don't. We are offering somewhere that has full opportunity. Our downtown urban core was really lacking that."

That note touches on perhaps the biggest hurdle to not only The Space Gallery, but to the Jacksonville urban core as a whole – trust in your community. Currently, you'd be hard pressed to find residents downtown. There is a limited number of apartment buildings, and the city is still fighting the negative stigma of a dangerous past life. What's missing is the people, but not for long.

While Jacksonville may be turning the corner on a concentrated "Art District," this concept is nothing new to the art world and already exists in cities across the nation. Take Miami and its well-known Wynwood Art District, founded in 2003. What began as abandoned neighborhoods, with some of the worst crime rates in the region, has now been transformed into an art mecca, taking the surrounding downtown community with it.

Wynwood Art District is scattered through once derelict warehouses and features upwards of 70 galleries along with studios, museums, restaurants and bars. It has often been called one of the biggest street art districts in the world. In 2009, Tony Goldman founded Wynwood Walls, an outdoor courtyard surrounded by oversized mural art, increasing the pedestrian traffic and bringing additional life into the neighborhood. The internationally famous Art Basel opened its 2nd location on Miami Beach in 2002 but its growth has since spread into Wynwood, featuring many local artists. In 2015 Art Basel hosted 267 galleries with 77,000 visitors to the area. Wynwood also hosts a monthly art walk opening the streets to galleries, food trucks and more. With this kind of momentum, it is easy to see the impact on the community for locals and tourists alike and thus the draw of such neighborhood changes for other cities across the country.

The development of Jacksonville closely mirrors these similar communities. "There's a little bit of a boom," tells Matthew. "I love the whole idea of the way they are trying to do the downtown revitalization: through the arts. If you want to be a part of it here, you just have to show up and want to do something. You have the opportunity to –



If you want to be a part of something here, you just have to show up and want to do something. You have the opportunity to - everybody does.

-Matthew Bennett



everybody does. We certainly benefited from it and jumped in full force. We want (The Space Gallery) to be one of the lynch pins of what is around town."

For Wyatt, downtown Jacksonville was always his goal. "I wanted to do it in the urban core. I have been trying for a very long time to get in down here. You see fringe galleries here and some in St. Augustine, Ponte Vedra, San Marco, but I really enjoy going to other cities and actually going to a gallery district. Even small places like Charleston and New Orleans have them. I really wanted to bring it downtown. Anywhere you go their art is in their urban core so I thought the opportunity for this space was amazing just because it is in such a good location."

These days, Jacksonville hosts its own Art Walk downtown and the impact is great. "You get to do events with other galleries and other artists," explains Wyatt. "It's a really good time and offers camaraderie between the galleries. We didn't have anything like that because of the walkability downtown."

"When we first moved back to Jacksonville," says Laura, "you noticed the change more. The Art Walk footprint had shrunk a little so we thought about that and where to draw it out a block or two. This last walk there was a ton of foot traffic. If we can get

more of that activity in olumps, people will see the masses and will walk here."

As we have seen in other cities, people make a difference. As Matthew puts it, "Art walk has been, out of everything that the city has done, the most successful at dispelling the myth of the unsafe city."

While people ultimately add energy and life to the community, continuing the upward trajectory of a neglected city still requires more than just a destination. "It takes art appreciation and bringing in a younger crowd," suggests Laura. "You need to develop a collector base in the city and I think that starts with the younger people coming in as well as the well-established people. The different things we have done so far, and the variety of people we have involved have really opened our eyes to other artists. There are new pockets that haven't had a place to be exposed and they are bringing everyone together."

"I think that's how we work together so well. I feel like we have a vision. We are to be what is needed. We will evolve based on what the need is here and the response and creativity. I've been inspired by the creativity that has been brought into Jacksonville and in here (the gallery) and the ideas that come forth from the people walking in.

Matthew and Laura Bennett and Wyatt Pariente stand amongst the works of their inaugural exhibit, "Holding Space" inside The Space Gallery at 120 E. Forsyth Street.



The vision is to be what is needed.”

“We’re here to push the community. It’s for the benefit of all of us. It’s not entirely self-serving. We have a specific opportunity to draw a crowd. With that exposure comes a much bigger opportunity to have a voice, culturally,” speaks Matthew.

And having a voice is exactly what The Space Gallery has done. Their first exhibit “Holding Space” not only represents Jacksonville and the Building Art Program but the energy of the art industry as a whole. “Going forward, message is the thing. I don’t feel like all the art has to be like that all the time, but it’s unique and it’s fascinating to deliver a message. Every artist has been working with that for years here,” says Matthew.

“I think now more than ever having a message and being able to deliver that message is what we need,” says Laura. “Having a space to do it and invite people who might not be art connoisseurs and going into spaces that are public spaces to show what the issues are. I think that’s important.”

For many, these spaces can offer more than just a message. Art programs are being removed from curriculum, and large art districts are some of the only opportunities for new generations to experience the culture. “We need to encourage peoples creativity,” explains Matthew. “The stifled are the ones that will find their voice and be driven to push back and be stronger for it.”

This concept of encouragement and leadership is one that hit a chord with Laura in particular. “I started in the Navy because I really wanted to be there and I wanted to serve. I became a midwife because I had a passion about women’s healthcare. Then I became a teacher and a few topics were important to me. I moved from that career and something else blossomed. I knew there was a different place. There are opportunities to create all over the world. I made those opportunities.”

“It’s important that there is this wave of creativity and building appreciation. We have to shift people’s opinions at a young age. For me, if I had not married Matt I wouldn’t have known. Sometimes I just need to be fed. I’ll go to an art opening and just listen. I leave feeling refreshed because they talk about things that other people don’t talk about.”

The controversy of art, or the lack there, in our society is nothing new. It’s a fight that has been on the forefront for years and will continue to do so. However, with each new generation comes a new way to reach them. While some may bemoan our obsession with screentime, technology and our dependence on it has also been an advocate for the art world. “It’s interesting to me as a visual artist,” explains Wyatt. “Instagram has caught on like wildfire and is such a visual medium. People that might not have been able to study it can now follow artists and see what they’re doing constantly. It’s been beneficial. They’re getting it from there.

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The vision is
to be what
is needed.

-Laura Bennett

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because they aren't getting it from anywhere else."

Tandem to the voice they are creating in our community, Matthew, Laura and Wyatt are doing their part to promote the arts on the most basic level. The Space Gallery opens its doors for events and has hosted a regular figure drawing class in their space. "If this is being used and we have three events here a week we'd be happy about that," says Matthew. "We host the figure drawing because with drawing in particular, that's really important to me. I think people should be taught how to draw form first grade. One, it gives an appreciation for art, but its also an important story. I just like bringing all these people together. Seeing them together in one space where they might not have had that opportunity before, that's good. We want to be something that the community shares. We're doing our best to put on the best shows we can while serving the Jacksonville arts community and city in general."

Whether they intended to or not, blazing the local trail is just what the trio of The Space Gallery is doing, bringing a movement, a community and an industry together. Spending just one afternoon with them, their energy and passion is palpable. They have become leaders for the revitalization and are doing it with a voice. "If we can just be a little piece in the puzzle of increasing Jacksonville's dialogue with the contemporary art world," says Wyatt, "that's what matters."

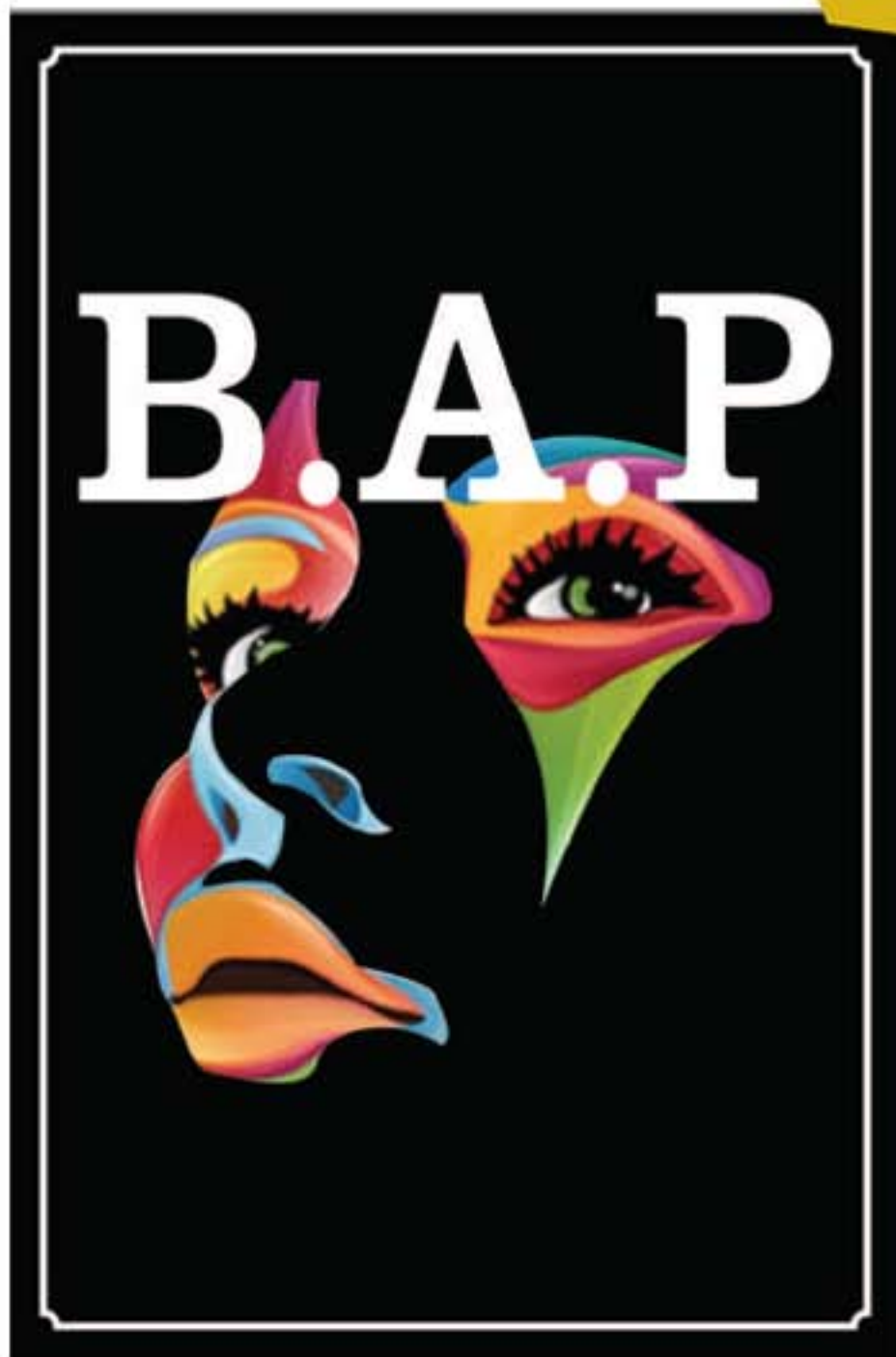
For Laura in particular, the movement has a non-art answer in all of it, "We are holding space and being open to what is available and moving with it. We are holding space for Margie, and for the building, and for the artists. It's holding space for all of those that can come and benefit from the art. It is also a philosophy of being open and not grasping."

"I don't think that I'm necessarily thinking of being a role model when I'm making decisions," says Wyatt, "but we do want to motivate people. The BAP is going to expand. I'm looking at other galleries and what they do, how they hang their things, and I hope that others will look to us. We never flinched in that."

"I flinched for a minute," laughs Laura, "then I said 'we're holding space.'"

"Any real area that is trying to reactivate their empty spaces," continues Wyatt, "the first people they call on are their artists. They want studios to go in there; they want something going on with it. Its not a new notion, just new here."

"The best thing about this place," says Matt, "is that there is no way for us to fail at this. We've already succeeded." ●



The Building Art Program signage was created by Dave Storey of Graphics Garage.

The Space Gallery

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Experience Art Walk in Downtown Jax the first Wednesday of the month and Art After Dark in the Elbow District directly following.
www.jacksonvilleartwalk.com
www.theelbowjax.com

To learn more about the BAP visit www.seamanrealty.com/building-artprogram