

Southampton Press, June 1, 2006

Art Gallery Announces Its Arrival

By Pat Rogers

Even before its official opening on Saturday, The Fireplace Project in East Hampton is making a splash.

Motorists slow down and then stop and stare at the colorful sculpture that takes up a swath of front lawn. The letters that spell out "YERSUPPOSETOACTALLIMPRESSED" are formed into a triangle that runs from 12 inches to 8 feet high and stretches about 20 feet across.

Still other passersby walk boldly through the front door of the former auto garage—past the painter who's touching up the walls—and ask, "What's going on here?"

What's going on is the birth of a new art gallery. The gallery and season will launch this Saturday with the solo show, "New Paintings by David Ryan." The gallery was founded and will be managed by Edsel Williams, an independent curator and private art dealer who has worked with Manhattan clients for the last 15 years. Locally, he has curated shows for Glen Horowitz Bookseller and the Green Barn gallery in Sagaponack.

Even though there was no art on the walls—up until recently—visitors could tell The Fireplace Project is an unusual place. The converted garage pays homage to its roots. The front room retains the knotty pine-covered wall and is sporting a new high-gloss sheen. Gallery space continues in two rooms. The main exhibition area is located in the well where cars were formerly fixed.

Exposed cinder block walls can be found in both areas. So can steel beams in spots near the ceiling. Track lighting lined with wood was installed for the front room, but the main exhibition area features fluorescent lights. The room has a video projector and a screen will be installed shortly.

The hope is that art films will be shown at the gallery and the projector will also allow video art to be included in exhibitions. Upstairs is the Project Room—a site Mr. Williams plans to turn over to artists for installations or to unveil projects. Outside, in the back of the gallery, is a large pebbled parking lot that is perfect for large gatherings. An awning will be installed to add a festive air and hammocks strung in nearby trees will encourage lingering.

The entire set-up was designed to support Mr. Williams's vision of The Fireplace Project—a place where Hamptons residents and visitors can come to see art made by young artists from across the country and then congregate to talk about it.

"This is a destination—you're not just going to walk in by accident," Mr. Williams said. "I like that. The people that will be here will really want to be here and have an interest in art. I hope that it will turn into a place where people will come to see art—whether they're artists or people interested in art; whether they are just looking at it or collecting it."

The Springs location was the perfect place to launch his first gallery, Mr. Williams said. The building is sandwiched firmly between art's past and its present. Across the street is the Pollock-Krasner House. A few blocks down the street is Ashawagh Hall—a popular venue for exhibitions that is frequently rented out by area artists.

Mr. Williams said he has been eyeing the space for more than two years. It was only recently that the Talmage family—the longtime owners of the auto garage/plumbing and heating shop—agreed to rent the building to Mr. Williams.

"The Talmages are old school East Hampton," Mr. Williams said. "They were friends with de Kooning, and Richard Talmage was best friends with Pollock. His family thought it appropriate and loved the idea that art would be shown here."

Mr. Williams plans to exhibit art created by young, emerging artists that is not typically seen in the local area. The sculpture on the lawn is a case in point. Created by Los Angeles artist Wayne White, the sculpture was moved from the outdoor plaza at Rockefeller Center where it was exhibited as part of "Art Rock," curated and sponsored by the Clementine Gallery. Mr. White is known for his anachronistic sculptures and for buying garage-sale lithographs and painting three-dimensional word art into the work.

Joining Mr. White's sculpture on the lawn will be towering carved wood sculptures by Martin Oppel. Mr. Oppel will have a solo show in August. Mr. Oppel is a Miami-based artist who has exhibited at Miami museums and galleries, "Art Basel," and galleries in Paris, Los Angeles and New York.

His paintings and sculptures explore what things are seen and how they are viewed, according to art critic Jeff Rian. His work also explores relationships between nature and culture, art and reality, construction and change, and art and commerce. To make sure the exhibitions feature a changing roster of emerging artists, many of the shows will be organized by independent curators. This summer will feature two shows by Manhattan-based curators John Connelly and Michael Steinberg. Mr. Steinberg's show, "Sci Fi Lullaby," will be presented at the end of July.

"I know whatever they do will be great," Mr. Williams said. "They've both talented curators. It's more brain power in one space—and a lot of creativity—than you'd have otherwise. The more people that walk through the door, the better the gallery will be. It extends the whole circle of art. My goal is to get as many people as possible interested in this place."

The Fireplace Project will launch on Saturday with a solo show of Mr. Ryan's paintings. His landscapes have a haunting, moody quality and incorporate such atypical conditions as fog, nocturnal light and pre-dawn scenarios. Mr. Williams described them as "studies in atmospheric minimalism."

Mr. Ryan is a former art assistant to the painter Ross Bleckner. Mr. Ryan lives and works in upstate New York.

Staying true to the area's history of supporting local artists, Mr. Williams hopes to stage a group invitation of local artists. They will most likely be culled from artists who have exhibited at Ashawagh Hall.

"I've seen so many artists whose work I've wanted to show at Ashawagh Hall," Mr. Williams said. "This is one of the reasons I opened a gallery—I want to show young

artists and give them some exposure.”

The inaugural exhibition, “New Paintings by David Ryan,” at The Fireplace Project will open on Saturday with a reception scheduled from 6 to 8 p.m. The show will be on view through June 26. The gallery is open Friday through Monday, 1 to 6 p.m. and by appointment. It is located at 851 Springs Fireplace Road in Springs. For information, call 324-4666.