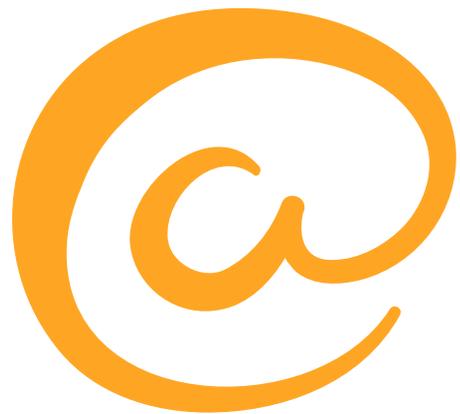


The Fireplace Project



**Edsel Williams's art space,
kindred spirits
find a new haunt**

By Susan M. Galardi



In Hinduism, the deity Hanuman is a symbol of strength, courage and humility. This monkey god was also the protector of Rama, the god of wisdom who is said to bestow light and joy.

An elaborate tattoo of Hanuman and a Sanskrit symbol for Rama cover the left forearm of Edsel Williams, founder and creative director of The Fireplace Project, a new gallery space on Springs-Fireplace Road in East Hampton. It's a fitting symbol: Anyone opening a new business on the high-stakes East End, and particularly a venture as risky as an art gallery at a time when established venues like Elaine Benson Gallery are on the real estate block, has to have an attitude of fearlessness. And like Hanuman, who serves the god of enlightenment, Williams has put himself at the service of those who create enlightening works of art.

In addition to Hindu deities, it's likely that other spirits may come into play at The Fireplace Project. With its close proximity to both the Pollock-Krasner House and Ashawagh Hall (the site of innumerable art exhibits over the years), an energy of art is in the air.

"The location of the space was vital," said Williams. *"The history of this area as an artist colony is centered around Springs. Every day that I'm at the space, four or five artists stop by to see what's going on."*

The building itself, a former plumbing and auto repair shop built in 1951 by the late Richard Talmage, has its own unexpected connection to the art colony. Willem de Kooning was a friend of the Talmage family; Jackson Pollock and Richie Talmage were close friends. Standing inside the cinderblock building, one wonders about artists who may have passed through its doors in Talmage's time.

"This is a very special building," said Williams, who has lived full time on the East End for more than a decade, and just down the road from the Project for the last few years. *"I've driven by as long as I've been out here and always thought it would make a good gallery space."*

As it turned out, this concept hadn't been lost on the Talmages. *"I talked to the family four years ago,"* said Williams. *"They were already talking to the Pollock-Krasner House about them leasing it, but that ultimately didn't work out, partly because the Talmages didn't want to sell the property."*

Keeping it Real

Eventually Williams's proposal to rent the space from the Talmages came to fruition: The Fireplace Project opened its doors June 3. Those doors lead to a space that is surprisingly similar to the original shop. With strong feelings about maintaining the essence of the building, Williams chose to retain much of its structure, inside and out.

"I wanted to keep it close to what was there—to make it look

like I did as little as possible,” he said. *“I believe that you steal the soul of a property if you tear down a building.”* Williams has even left a sign leaning against the building that reads 851 Talmage. *“It’s important for history,”* he added.

The repair shop’s cinderblock walls also remain. In the front space, existing wood paneling was given a shiny layer of polyurethane. The white wall that runs the full length of the main gallery appears to be solid, although several squares can pop out to reveal windows. *“I still wanted to see the trees,”* Williams said. Needless to say, the shop’s wide front window is intact, but Williams had a screen made to fit over the glazing to accommodate usage of the LCD projector in the main gallery space.

“The big decision was where I wanted to place the walls for art,” he said. *“I wanted all the wall space to be accessible, but I wanted to keep it very open. I did box in a stairwell to create more wall space.”*

Williams utilizes the second floor, with its pitched ceiling, for both his office and additional gallery space. He removed a small, deteriorating deck from the second level, to be replaced by a classic New York City fire escape. In fact, it’s uncanny how this former East End repair shop has the feeling of a lower Manhattan industrial space turned gallery.

That New York feeling was also created by the audience at the gallery, particularly at the reception for “Tempest,” a show of 13 artists curated by John Connelly. In addition to many local artists and art aficionados in attendance, the opening drew a serious art crowd that came, literally, from miles away. The Fireplace Project is clearly not on the beaten path of galleries clustered in East End villages, easy for a casual passerby to trip into for a quick diversion. Going to The Fireplace Project is reserved for those on a quest.

“I wanted it to be a destination,” said Williams. *“I want to attract people to the gallery who are genuinely interested in art. If I do good programs, good exhibitions, people will come.”*

Williams has built his career in the art world on his ability to get people to come see art. Although he has worked as a curator locally for Glen Horowitz Bookseller, he is primarily an art dealer—a profession he entered by accident but embraced with passion, as evidenced by his personal art collection of about 300 works. His enthusiasm for the business is most evident in his own home: a classic, simple Springs farmhouse where the artwork’s only competition for attention is Charlie, the strikingly beautiful two-year-old boy whom Williams and his partner adopted.

Once a visitor manages to look away from Charlie, he or she will find plenty to look at on every vertical surface. There’s an extraordinary April Gornick landscape; a lacy, skeletal handgun made of sugar and egg whites by Susan Graham; a Ross Bleckner painting that evokes colorful, ghostly Christmas





Opening page: Works included in “Tempest”—the first curated group show at The Fireplace Project, last summer.

Previous spread, left: A sculpture by Martin Oppel, whose work is currently on view in a solo show until October 3.

Below right, “Grape”, 2004, by Goran Tomcic, part of the “Sci-Fi Lullabies” show.

Hanuman, the monkey god: the symbol of strength, courage and humility.

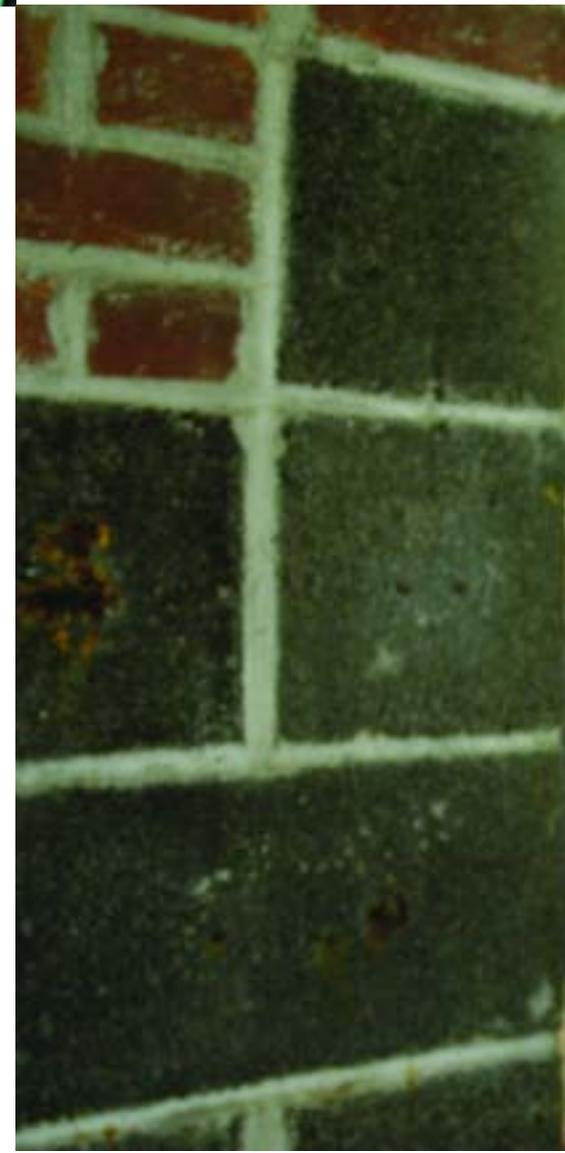
bulbs; a photorealistic painting of a Volvic bottle by Michael Stoughton; a work by National Seashore Cartographer Mark Adams, who overlays his maps with painted images of indigenous wildlife; a graphic piece by Howard Fonda that reads “Narrow, dirt paths can lead to love.”

The Accidental Career

Williams’s path to his love of the art world began when he left his native state of Virginia in 1985. “I went to New York to study dance, and I got job offers right away,” he said. “I started meeting artists and set painters at different theaters.” Several years later, on the East End, Williams ran his own dance studio called FizzEd for 10 years. It was there that his careers dovetailed.

“I had an exhibition space right next to the studio where I could hang work I liked of young artists,” he said. “To get to the studio, you had to pass through the exhibit space, so I kind of forced the art. People started buying like crazy. Everything I’d show would sell.”

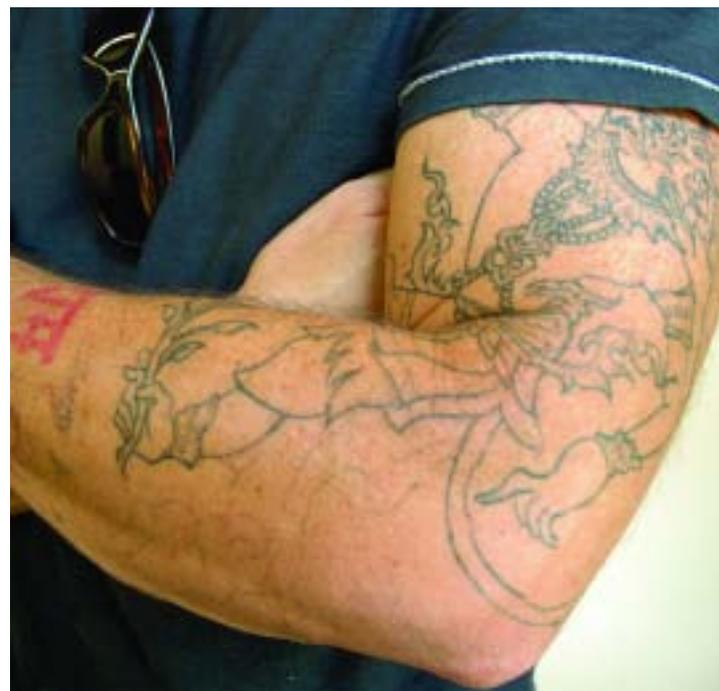
By the time Williams closed the studio, he had built a new business, working primarily with private collectors who



were interested predominantly in the work of young artists. And that was exactly the crowd at the opening of “Tempest.” Most of the work was by young New York artists, who “all have gallery representation in New York,” said Williams, adding, “many of them have shown in the Whitney Biennial.”

Despite the pedigree of the artists chosen for the show, Williams insists that he is “the farthest thing from an art snob.” Rather, he reiterates his goal, “I just feel responsible to do the best exhibitions,” he said. Williams strives for this by finding and showing artists that are fully dedicated to creating high quality work.

“I need to see artists in their studios because it’s their career, not their hobby. That’s very important to me,” he said. “I look at everything an artist has done, for a consistency throughout their body of work. It’s hard for me to focus if an artist’s work jumps all over the place. For example, a good painter—does he explore the way he paints? Are the techniques consistent? There are artists I know who do work made of trash. It’s the way the pieces are made and the quality of work that’s important.”





The Creative Strategy

In addition to choosing artists to lend their creative vision to his new space, Williams also chooses curators, thus handing over the creative direction to someone else—a somewhat unusual strategy in the curator/owner-driven gallery world. Again, Williams sees his role as a conduit, providing a venue for many ideas.

“I want as many creative minds thinking about this project as possible,” he said. *“Creatively, I’d rather collaborate. I want to see how other people interpret the space and decide what’s right to present. I’m artistic director, and yes I choose the curators, but I make no suggestions as far as which artists they should use.”*

This approach is indicative of Williams’s larger vision, which is summed up in the name of the space as ‘project’ rather than ‘gallery.’

“The trend in the last five years is to use names other than ‘gallery,’ like the Perez Project in Los Angeles and Berlin. I called the space a ‘project’ because it’s consistent with my mission to present three types of exhibits: solo, curated and artist projects. If there’s an artist I’m interested

in, I’ll let him or her take the space. David Ryan was a solo artist show that I curated, but we still collaborated. I may not have chosen everything he brought in, but if there was something he really wanted, I wouldn’t say no. It’s his show. I respect what the artists want the public to see.”

For the curated shows—like “Tempest”—Williams invited John Connelly “to do what he wanted.” He took the same tack with curators Michael Steinberg and Daria Brit Shapiro for the show “Sci-Fi Lullabies,” which featured 15 artists whose works evoke “an eerie otherworldliness, reminiscent of science fiction movies.”

The first ‘artist project’ in the space is the current show, featuring the work of painter/sculptor Martin Oppel that’s on view from September 2 through October 3. *“Martin creates works for a particular space,”* said Williams, who curated the show. *“He is very site-specific.”*

As is The Fireplace Project, on its auspicious site within one of the East End’s seminal art colonies, where enlightenment awaits keepers of the faith who make the journey.

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