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Painters Michael Jorden (left) and Steve Staresina were instrumental in bringing the Okanagan Art Gallery to Osoyoos a year ago. They've seen a four-fold increase in visitors since moving. (Richard McGuire photo)

Okanagan Art Gallery marks one-year anniversary of move to Osoyoos

By Richard McGuire

If you don't notice the sandwich board on the sidewalk of Main Street in Osoyoos, you might miss the largest art gallery in town that's tucked away in former law offices behind the stores.

The Okanagan Art Gallery, which moved to Osoyoos from Oliver in August 2015, only has a few feet of frontage – just enough for a doorway leading to a long hallway lined with paintings.

But step through that doorway, make your way down the hall, and you'll come to room after sky lit room – six in total – with walls covered in paintings and other artworks by some of the best artists in the South Okanagan.

The gallery is a transplant. For four and a half years, it operated as the Oliver Art Gallery.

The move came as artists were negotiating a lease for new space in a former provincial government building in Oliver last year. Talks were taking a long time and there were space limitations.

One member of the co-operative observed that the Os-

oyoos Art Gallery was getting much more walk-in traffic than Oliver. Suddenly the idea of moving to Osoyoos was on the table and seemed to make sense.

Two of the artists who have been instrumental in launching the new gallery, Michael Jorden from Osoyoos and Steve Staresina from Oliver, both say the move was a good one.

Staresina says the number of visitors in the new location has been consistently about a four-fold increase from Oliver throughout the past year.

"Osoyoos has a lot more foot traffic, particularly in this block where there are restaurants on both sides of the street," said Jorden. "It's en route to the beach and in the winter we have a full town of snowbirds, so all the visitors have been very good for the gallery for the entire year."

The Okanagan Art Gallery is located between Shoe Biz and A New Leaf Tea Room, across the street from Shoppers Drug Mart. It's close to Jojo's Café and the Owl Pub.

Staresina said many visitors wander across from the Watermark Beach Resort, where they are often staying.

"We also get people coming in from the Okanagan as far as Vernon because they've heard about the gallery and they're interested in art," said Staresina. "If something catches their eye, they buy it. And if it doesn't, they come back. We try to have about 25 or 30 per cent of the art change every month."

The gallery is a co-operative with just over two dozen members from across the South Okanagan, with a few from the Similkameen and Boundary areas.

Asked to describe the artists, Staresina replies: "Well, there are 25 artists and 25 styles. It's all the mediums."

In reality, although there are sculptors and a photographer, most of the artists are painters and they lean heavily toward acrylics. Jorden and Staresina, however, prefer to work in oils.

"As far as styles are concerned, there's everything from pure abstract to very representational," said Jorden. "And pretty well everything in between."

Many of the half dozen or so Osoyoos artists are also involved with Artists on Main and are active with the Osoyoos Art Gallery.

Indeed, there's a spirit of co-operation between the two major Osoyoos galleries, which both have their own distinct roles.

"We get referrals from the town gallery and we in turn always mention that there's another gallery in town," said Jorden. "It's a very co-operative relationship."

At the Okanagan Art Gallery, each of the member artists has their own wall space where they display a self-portrait and they change over the other artworks on a regular basis as they see fit.

"We exist as a group to enable us as individual artists to invest our time and our money putting art on our own walls," said Jorden. "We entered this as a business venture. It may be a non-profit, but we're still a business

venture. You could call it a vanity gallery, but it's not really. It's both an opportunity to run a private gallery and to build an art business."

In contrast, the Osoyoos Art Gallery features exhibitions that change roughly once a month, except for the longer summer artisan market.

Typically an exhibit there features one or two artists, or possibly a group. When one exhibition ends, it's replaced by another.

Jorden and Staresina say they've looked into the possibility of having the co-operative purchase their building, which is ideal with its wall space and skylighting, but weren't able to reach an agreement. When their lease runs out in two years, they have the option to renew for another three.

"I do want this to continue," said Jorden.

The painter, who is in love with Western scenes, makes a regular pilgrimage to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"It's a town about double the size of Penticton with 250 art galleries," said Jorden. "Penticton has about four. So it's the second most popular art destination in the United States, a town of 70,000 people. It got that way because it became known as an art mecca and so art built on art built on art."

"I would love to see Osoyoos become an art destination," he continued. "If we had a third gallery, we had a fourth gallery, it wouldn't bother me at all."

Art, he said, could become one of the things people think about when they plan their vacations in Osoyoos or plan to stay the winter or simply for a weekend.

"The only way that we can contribute to that is to continue to do what we do and try to do it better all the time," said Jorden. "It means each one of us has to take responsibility for our art and being the best artists that we can be."



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