

The News Journal

Jamie Wyeth exhibition at Breck's Mill

By Maureen Milford

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When Victoria Manning decided to open an art gallery in a Greenville shopping center in the early 1980s, everyone told her it was a bad idea.

"I wanted to do a high-quality art gallery that showcased works from other parts of the country, and they didn't think it would work because the area wouldn't support it," Manning said.

A decade later, when Manning relocated Somerville Manning Gallery to an historic property in Breck's Mill, clients, artists and friends said she was making a big mistake. Too far off the beaten track, they said. But Manning said she knew they were wrong.



"You know why? An art gallery is a destination place," she said Saturday as she stood in her 1,600-square-foot art gallery on the Brandywine Creek near Greenville.

This winter, the gallery has been a destination for those who appreciate and collect works by artist Jamie Wyeth, son of the great American artist Andrew Wyeth and grandson of American illustrator N.C. Wyeth. Manning, who frequently exhibits works by the Wyeths in her gallery, said this is her first solo show featuring just work by Jamie Wyeth.

Manning timed the show to coincide with a major retrospective of Jamie Wyeth's work now at the Brandywine River Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania.

What's unique about the Somerville Manning exhibition is that all 29 oil, watercolors and mixed-media paintings are works that most people don't get to see because they are held by private individuals or owned by Wyeth, Manning said.

For that reason, some people who have seen the show at Brandywine River Museum have traveled to Wilmington to see the other exhibit on the Brandywine. What's more, unlike a museum, all the works at Somerville Manning are available for purchase.

Although the work is high end, Manning has had collectors come to Wilmington from around the country, thanks to the city's easy access to I-95, Amtrak, an international airport and a private airport, she said.

"Art collectors are passionate about the art they collect, and definitely Wyeth collectors are extremely passionate," Manning said.

For Manning, it's a kind of validation that she's had an influence on Wilmington's art scene.

"When I came here, the work people were buying were full-sheet watercolors of local subjects," she said.

John Otley, a Wyeth fan who lives in Brandywine Hundred, took in the exhibit Saturday, studying the paintings featuring animals, such as Wyeth's 1969 watercolor "Pig" and the more recent "Goose Lays Golden Egg."

"I love his birds," Otley said.

Manning said Wyeth was receptive to her proposal to do an exhibit at the same time as the Brandywine River Museum retrospective.

"Jamie thought it was a great idea," Manning said. "I have a long history of working with the Wyeths. I've done several solo exhibitions of N.C. Wyeth and also Andrew Wyeth. I did an exhibition of Andrew Wyeth's work during his show at the Philadelphia Art Museum in 2006. I did an exhibition called 'Wyeth Women,' featuring works by the three daughters of N.C. Wyeth."

The gallery's physical space in the historic Henry Clay village seems a fitting setting for the Wyeth works and Brandywine art tradition.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the stone building dates to 1814 when it was a textile mill. Alfred Victor du Pont acquired it in the early 19th century and operated it as a woolen mill, according to "Delaware: A Guide to the First State," written by Federal Writers' Project in 1938.

"For years, it has served for informal parties of the du Pont family," the guide says. "Here a family orchestra used to rehearse, and amateur dramatics have been staged for charity."

During World War I, the building became Hagley Community Center for munitions workers, the guide says. William Winder "Chick" Laird Jr. donated the building to Hagley Museum in 1970. It continues to be owned by Hagley.

Today, the creek rushes below the gallery windows with the water providing a kind of background music for the exhibition.

Manning's niche is American artists of the 20th- and 21st-century.

"I don't do super-edgy, avant-garde," she said.

Once a year, Somerville Manning Gallery holds an American masters exhibit, which has featured works by artists such as Mary Cassatt and John Singer Sargent. Because all works must be available for purchase, Manning said she is sometimes surprised by works she can find for exhibition.

"I never know what's going to be in the show," she said. "It's a lot of work."

The Jamie Wyeth exhibition continues through March 7.