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Goldberg: The Woman Behind the Flame at Zenith Gallery

By Rosetta DeBerardinis

“Art is truth,” declares Margery Goldberg, the owner of [Zenith Gallery](#) in Washington, DC’s Penn Quarter who yesterday closed ONLY the doors to her downtown store front, but not her business. And, if it is truth you want, she is your lady. Ms. Goldberg is one of the most honest and outspoken members of the Greater DC art community.

“When you own your own business there is no sabbatical,” she sighs. “You work all the time.” She wants to make it perfectly clear that she is NOT closing her business, but merely changing the way she does business. The success of Zenith has been reliant upon her visibility and her relationships with the artist and art patrons along with its ties to the community. “I haven’t had a day off in years,” she declares. “I am exhausted!”

Many of the readers of this blog were not born yet when Ms. Goldberg opened the doors to her first gallery on 14th Street in 1978. There she rented a 50,000 sq. foot industrial space and nurtured and supported 50 artists. She relocated Zenith Gallery to its present location on Seventh Street in 1986. Many of the artists who began their careers with her remain affiliated with the gallery or return to exhibit in her annual anniversary show. When asked why she wanted to be responsible for the career and welfare of fifty artists, she shot back, “I always take care of everybody”. And, her care-taking extends to her family, her dog Max and to the needs of her now deceased father.

“This is a bitter-sweet moment,” she laments. “I have wanted to do this for years but I waited until I hit a good round number. Thirty is a good one, much better than 18 or twenty-five. I wanted to do it on my terms.” The petite woman with coiled hair, a boisterous voice and one of the best sock collections on the East Coast, is a tough business woman with a big heart.

She is concerned about the impact the closing will have on the downtown business district. “Zenith is more than a gallery is a close-knit part of the community,” she explains. When Zenith moved on 7th Street, it was not the upscale real estate district that it is today. The million dollar condos and the yuppie chains did not exist and the rents were reasonable. Today, it another part of the city where artists have pioneered through urban blight and can no longer afford to remain.

However, Zenith is not moving because of the absorbent rent increases. That is something Ms. Goldberg wants to drive-home. Unlike other downtown landlords and developers, hers has been most supportive and wishes the gallery would stay. Zenith is leaving its brick and mortar because its owner needs a rest and believes there is a new way to operate in the art world. Most of the staff will remain on the payroll and so will the majority of the artists it represents. Although, she did admit that this is an excellent time to sever ties with those artists who are either difficult to deal with or whose work isn’t in demand.

“When I first opened, I had this motto: Genius, good-looks and money are not an excuse to be an asshole,” she says laughing. So, if you are one of those she recommends that you find another gallery, not hers. In addition to her disdain for prima-donnas, she has no great admiration for urban developers, D.C. Mayor Fenty or the Washington Post critics since Paul Richards. She accuses the developers of

raising rents sky-high making downtown real estate too expensive for small business owners and that the District of Columbia offers little support for its small businesses, especially the arts. Her mantra is, "I am mad as hell and can't take it anymore!"

As artists continue to whine about declining sales, the absence of press coverage and high commissions few understand or care about the responsibilities of the art dealer or gallerist who is chained to a storefront operation from opening to closing, answering calls from artists and customers, paying the rent on the white cube and mounting show after show each year. She predicts that storefront commercial galleries will begin to disappear. "Nobody can afford the rent and it's not safe anymore," she says. It was surprising to learn that Zenith is robbed almost once a week. No, they don't break the large glass windows that would be too obvious. Instead the thieves snatch a small piece or sculpture, a cell phone on a desk or a wallet buried deep inside an employee's purse. Ms. Goldberg attributes the lack of police presence as part of the problem. And, when she calls the police they claim to be unable to find the gallery.

Since art dealers and gallerists are a pivotal link between artists and their public and between sellers and collectors, her prediction about the disappearance of storefronts will have a definite impact upon the local art market. If she is correct, art galleries will soon become destination points and few will be able survive in obscurity. Nor does she believe chain galleries can survive in there. When asked why so many galleries fail, she provides a direct and honest response. "Anyone can open an art gallery," she admits. "But, they have no freaking idea how hard it is- the hard work and the hours. It is for people who need to make money, not for the rich. It is for those who need to earn a living and who have a fire in their belly." According to Ms. Goldberg, even rich contacts are a restricted audience because patrons only purchase a limited amount of art annually. Then, there is the daily grind which is so demanding and that most people simply don't want to work that hard, despite their love for art.

When she closes the doors to the glass fish-bowl this week, Zenith gallery will begin to operate its new format. With most of the staff continuing and the construction of a gallery in her home, Ms. Goldberg intends to cast her entrepreneurial net far and wide. She will continue to work with her stable of artists and retain a relationship with the 20,000 people in her database. Watch out, she is taking her show on the road doing traveling exhibitions, studio visits, art tours, promoting her foundation, producing and exhibiting more of her own sculpture and dreaming about the 100-acre art community she hopes to develop. She may say she is tired but her 'to-do list' is quite long. I predict that Margery Goldberg will sleep late a few mornings here and there and take off a day or two once in a while, but this woman with fire in her belly will remain a noticeable flame.