



COLUMN

Art is the way to market Washington County

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Washington County has more to offer than cows and cheese (not that there's anything wrong with cows and cheese), and proved it a few weeks ago during the Open Studios tour when local artists sold more than \$100,000 worth of art.

The artists showcase started in 2005 and is held every two years. Not anyone can jump in — you have to get chosen to participate through a juried process, and the two jurors are drawn from outside the county to avoid favoritism.

Once chosen, artists have to have their studios inspected, to make sure they'll work as part of a public tour. New artists get help from the organization with marketing, and the whole tour gets promoted for months ahead of time on the organization's website and through social media.

The tour stretches over four days and this year included 20 artists, who hosted more than 4,000 visits to their studios.

Serena Kovalosky, an artist who grew up in Whitehall, co-founded the tour in 2005.

"It's surprising," she said, of the number of artists in Washington County. "You look at the number of artists per capita, it's astounding."

These aren't folks taking pretty sunset photos and painting fall foliage. These are artists working in all sorts of mediums, creating accomplished, professional works and selling them, in many cases, for thousands of dollars.

The Open Studios organization covers all of its own promotional costs. All of its organizers work for free.

This is the bandwagon county supervisors who have been searching for a way to increase tourism should jump on. Farm and fiber tours are great, but art tours can bring in a different clientele, with money to spend. Some of them might even go second-home shopping while they're here.

Kovalosky left the area for 25 years after college, but moved back to concentrate on making art and lives now in Cambridge, which she called the "best little arts town ever."

"The whole region is great. There's always something cultural going on. It makes it a really nice place to live. I just went to a show at Gardenworks of all places. They have a gallery in their barn. They've got a little wine and cheese thing going on."

Another Washington County artist who has visited Italy told Kovalosky that Washington County reminded her of Tuscany.

"It's the Tuscany of New York," Kovalosky said, which would not be a bad way to market this lovely agricultural region with a rich culture of fine arts.

Instead of historic villas, Washington County has historic barns, and for espresso, red wine and bruschetta, it can substitute fresh cider, red wine and chevre.

The county may not have an answer for the Uffizi Gallery or Michelangelo's "David," but I hear the farm and fiber tour is pretty good.

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