

# Chagrin Valley Times

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Photo by Michael Steinberg

The Valley Art Center is celebrating 50 years, kicking off a year of programming with their current exhibit, "Visionaries." The exhibit features the work of some of the Bell Street center's founding members from the first 10 years of its operations, displaying pieces that Director Mary Ann Breisch, pictured, said best represent the artists' styles. Ms. Breisch stands beside one of many installments in the Margaret "Peg" Bowen Gallery; this piece, titled "Something Like A Breakdown," is one of three sculpted double-wall pottery pieces on display made by ceramics artist Tracy Ameen.

## Celebrating 50 years

Valley Art Center shines light on 'Visionaries' exhibit

By SAMANTHA COTTRILL

The Valley Art Center is kicking off its celebration of 50 years by shining a light on early artists who shared a vision.

The exhibit, "Visionaries," which opened Sept. 11 and runs through Oct. 14, features the artists who helped pave the way for the Bell Street creative space in its first 10 years of operation and begins a year-long celebration of the art center's history.

"We started in a period of unrest," said VAC Director Mary Ann Breisch of the art center's beginnings in 1971. With the Vietnam War, the Kent State May 4, 1970 shootings, civil rights tensions and public unrest creating a divide in the country, Ms. Breisch said artists were looking for an inclusive place to create art amidst the "chaos."

"The founders were committed to making sure there was a place to make art," she said. Now with the novel coronavirus pandemic, a deep political divide with the upcoming presidential election and economic recession, "here we are 50 years later in a period of unrest, and we're [still] committed to making sure there's a place to make art."

The VAC is celebrating with a year of gallery

programming, Ms. Breisch said. Starting with "Visionaries," the calendar of events lined up as the center enters their 50th year includes the Annual Juried Art Exhibit opening Nov. 6, the Student-Faculty exhibit opening Jan. 29 and the Illustrious Alumni exhibit opening April 2. The Illustrious Alumni exhibit will include artists who studied at VAC or got a start there who are now "thriving, professional artists out in the world," she said.

Other events include a whiskey painters exhibit featuring the works of Whiskey Painters of America, an exclusive and elite group of watercolorists, which Ms. Breisch said "hearkens back to the beginnings of the art

Turn to VAC on Page 10

### VAC continued from Page 9

center," and an online exhibit to feature the works of regional high school students in Advanced Placement art courses.

"We will have the future and then the past kind of all at once," she said.

Art by the Falls, she added, will look a little different with changes to make up for the cancellation of the annual event last spring. The spring art festival, originally scheduled for June 6 and June 7 this year was supposed to kick off the year of celebrations for VAC. More details will come on that at a later date regarding the 2021 event, Ms. Breisch said, hinting at a formal announcement for October.

### A half-century in the making

Now with 50 years under their belt, the VAC is overcoming challenges new and old.

Just last year, the VAC was exploring how they can adapt and evolve their annual Art by the Falls in a rapidly changing and digital era, hoping to attract younger generations and artists with modern appeal.

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the following state-mandated shutdowns, Ms. Breisch said she's "singing everyone else's song" when she recounted how the art center quickly adjusted to a new digital platform.

**"There are a lot of challenges and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, but they have helped us create new ways of delivering our programming. We've talked about having virtual classes. We talked about having an online store," Ms. Breisch said. "We were forced to make these changes due to the pandemic, and it's not all bad.**

"And our history, looking back," she continued, "that's kind of true at the time, that there were all these obstacles, but they found all these solutions to these challenges working together, this crazy ragtag group of visionaries."

While the VAC was officially incorporated in 1971, Ms. Breisch explained that local artists and stakeholders had been exploring the idea of developing a place for art making for many years before then, with various individuals and entities having their hands in the creation of the art center the Chagrin Valley knows today.

Fifty years ago, the "ragtag" artists were asking themselves how to set up an inclusive space to make and display art with no building before incorporating the VAC. "They were setting it up in people's homes and over at the movie theater and wherever they could," Ms. Breisch said. "Now, we have a building, but we had to figure out how to change our building to make it safe and [maintain] social distancing and still be inclusive for as many people as possible."

The art center started off with just 14 classes in its first year of operation, but by 1975 it offered 41 classes and recruited about 800 members, according to their archives. Today, the art center offers about 400 classes each year to more than 1,500 students of all ages and talents in five classrooms, now in person and online. The instruction is not alone in the art center's digital offerings, accompanied by an online gift shop and virtual gallery tours.

### One of many on display

The VAC credits more than 20 individuals as the founders of the art center, including Judy and Gerry Pinckard, Kathy and Don Smith, Howard and Cara Stirn and Julie Weber. The early artists and "master instructors" include printmaker and painter Peg Bowen; watercolorists Mary Ann Boysen, Susie Graham, Dale Harsh, Darlene Jackson, Florian Lawton, Fred Leech, Jan Mettee, Clarence Perkins and Lois Salmon Toole; ceramicists Tracy Ameen, George Roby and Joan Rusek; colored pencil artist Mary Hobbs; and mixed media artists Phyllis Lloyd, Beth Ann Raymond, Peg Strohmenger and Bobbi Wheeler, most of whom are featured in the current exhibit.

One of the 20 "Visionaries" featured in the kick-off exhibit is the late Florian Lawton, who, as Ms. Breisch pointed out, was a member of the esteemed whiskey painters and most known locally for his depictions of the Amish.

Kenneth Lawton, trustee of the Florian

K. Lawton Foundation and son of the late Aurora artist, concurred, ready with a breadth of knowledge on his father's work.

As VAC was taking off, so was Mr. Lawton's father as a fine artist.

"His work really resonated for his relationships with the Amish," Mr. Lawton said, noting that his work was comparable to the styles of Frederick Remington and Charles Russell, who were famous for their paintings of cowboys and Native Americans at the turn of the 20th century.

Mr. Lawton's watercolor paintings depicted the Amish communities primarily of Ohio, including those in Middlefield and Burton, most notably in the wintry months.

"I have a particular fondness for winter scenes," the late artist had said, as quoted in an introduction to a catalog of his work, "Florian K. Lawton: Fifty Years of Art," by Henry Adams, from a 2010 Butler Museum of American Art exhibit. "Winter is a very meditative time of year. I like to paint it because I can see the structures of the trees instead of the masses of green."

He elaborated on this, adding that the cold season "stimulates and recharges my creative focus."

Mr. Lawton said his father was a "realist" as a watercolorist and was trained in the art first as an illustrator. As he helped in the founding of the VAC, he also taught at the Cleveland Institute of Art and was also a member of various watercolor societies.

Mr. Lawton's father died in 2011 at the age of 89. Mr. Lawton said while his death was due to the witherings of age, "his mind was sharp as a tack. He had classes scheduled two weeks out after the point in which he actually passed away."

"The man loved his art. He loved helping and teaching, and the whole process of creating art was with him until the very end," he continued. "It's a great testimonial to his passion."

The late Mr. Lawton's works are among many to be seen at the "Visionaries" exhibit at the VAC, 155 Bell St. in Chagrin Falls, during business hours and from 6-8 p.m. Thursdays by appointment only. The gallery is also available to reserve for small groups of 10 people or less by contacting the art center at 440-247-7507. For more information, a full list of exhibiting artists or for a virtual tour of the exhibit, visit [valleyartcenter.org](http://valleyartcenter.org).