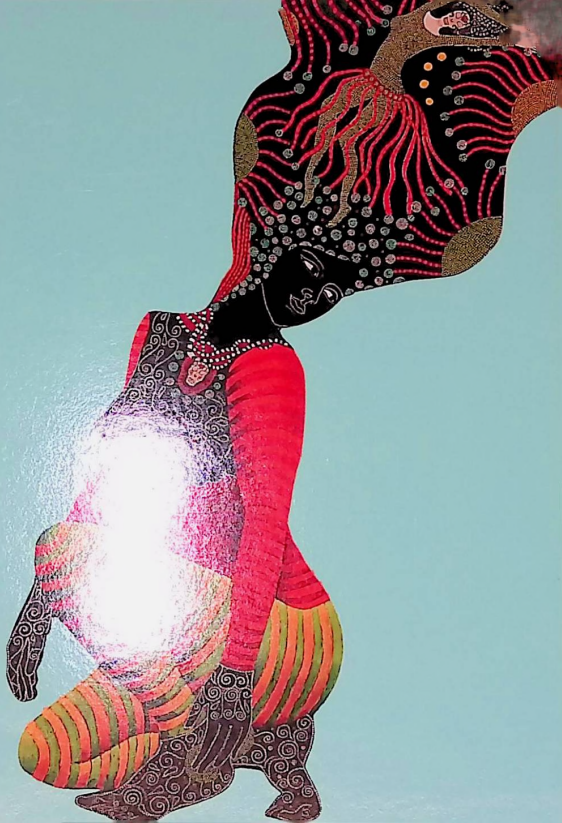




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DANIELLE MAILER

"Body and Soul"

The Roger Smith Lab Gallery

June 8th -17th 2006

Opening Reception

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Artwork by Danielle Mailer "Tattooed Madonna 2006" acrylic on masonite

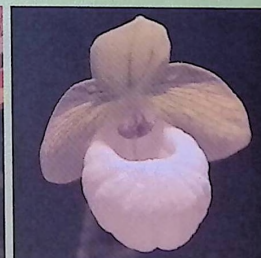
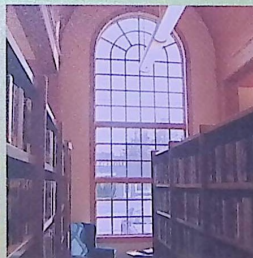
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TAKIN' IT TO THE STREETS

Artist Maggie Mailer sees downtown Pittsfield through a glass brightly

WRITTEN BY BESS HOCHSTEIN PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT BARROW

MAGGIE MAILER IS UNDER PRESSURE. She's working on an upcoming installation for the Ferrin Gallery in Lenox, Massachusetts, for which she intends to create a conceptual timeline tracing the evolution of her work. The dense jumble of raw materials—paint tubes, chunks of glycerin, ceramic shards, packets of sandpaper, binders full of carefully cataloged ideas and artifacts, paintings large and small, plus notations scrawled across the walls—creates a chaotic, intense environment in her inadequately heated studio. Trying to explain the concept, Mailer comments in fits and starts, pausing to think, dark brows furrowed, before spewing ideas. Certain words recur: process, material, friction, flow, abrasive, ephemeral, boundaries, impermanence, context, opacity, transparency.

It's this last word—transparency—that resonates most. Mailer's studio is behind glass. She works in a storefront on North Street, the main

thoroughfare of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, exposing herself and her creative process to the gaze of a passerby. Mailer is living her conceptual experiment by working on display rather than sequestered in a hidden studio.

Mailer's inquiry into the act of working in public view germinated during post-graduate architecture studies. "I presented the idea of a glass-box residency, a living museum that would have artists as the artwork, where the process was the focal point rather than the finished work," she explains. "The professors all said I was crazy, that no one would want to work that way." Mailer has, however, proved them wrong. Her concept has evolved into the Storefront Artist Project, a loose organization involving some forty artists in all media that has generated coast-to-coast media attention and brought new life—and hope—to the streets of Pittsfield. In addition to the eighteen artists

now working in the donated space, there's a long waiting list of others vying for free, exposed studios.

Raised in the Berkshires, Mailer pursued the life of a Young New York Artist upon graduation from Columbia University. An English major, she had thought she would be a writer and follow in the footsteps of her father, literary giant Norman Mailer. But a senior-year class with sculptor Judy Pfaff unveiled her true direction as a visual artist. "I think he was a little disappointed when I didn't pursue [writing]," Mailer says of her dad. "Who knows, I might go back to it, but I found that I needed to paint in ways that I didn't need to write."

Mailer found a job painting murals in restaurants and homes while developing her own work, but her perspective on city life dimmed on 9/11. Within three weeks she returned to the Berkshires, where her mother, jazz chanteuse Carol Stevens, still resides. "I had been thinking of leaving the city anyway, so this just seemed like the obvious time to go. I always felt that my heart was in the Berkshires."

Mailer took an administrative job with the Colonial Theatre; Joyce Bernstein, then-president of the board of directors, gave her free use of the North Street storefront that

"redwhitepinkblue," oil on vellum, by Maggie Mailer.

Mailer still occupies. "I was an art major in college—I'm sympathetic to artists," says Bernstein, who, with partner Larry Rosenthal, owns Pittsfield-based Link to Life—a personal emergency medical response company—as well as a few buildings in the city. "She said she was going to be looking for studio space." Bernstein offered her the rear of one building, but Mailer chose the 1,000-square-foot storefront. "It was a vision she had of working more connected to the public instead of being a poor, starving artist in a garret," explains Bernstein.

Working in the storefront immediately felt right to Mailer. "Even though I was very shy growing up, I think I always wanted to be on stage," she says. "This seemed like a way of doing it surreptitiously. The window became a permeable boundary. If you want to treat it like the fourth wall in a theater you can. Or you can look at the people walking around like moving wallpaper."

Mailer sought to share her good fortune with others. "One of the first things I noticed when I got to Pittsfield was all the empty storefronts and what great studios they would make," she says. "Everyone thought it was a strange idea; people thought other artists wouldn't be willing to work that way."

"Even though I was very shy growing up, I think I always wanted to be on stage. This seemed like a way of doing it surreptitiously."

Peter Lafayette, president of Berkshire Housing Development Corporation, became Mailer's early ally. A board member of Pittsfield's Downtown, Inc., and a firm believer in the arts as an engine for economic revitalization, Lafayette volunteered his efforts as soon as he saw Mailer working in Bernstein's storefront. He helped landlords understand how donating vacant space could serve their commercial interests, pointing out successful arts-driven turnarounds in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Portland, Maine, and Providence, Rhode Island. That summer he helped painter Douglass Truth,

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who was about to rent a studio in North Adams, secure 2,000 square feet at 379 North Street for six months. It turned into a one-and-a-half-year residency. More artists and space soon followed; the Storefront Artist Project was born.

While most press has focused on the project as a catalyst of revitalization, Mailer's initial focus was conceptual. "I was incensed that Pittsfield was always described in such a disparaging manner by the rest

of the Berkshires because I thought it was beautiful," she says. "I loved the buildings and architecture; I could see it as a really vibrant place. But honestly, I was more interested in testing this idea, trying to see if it was possible to work in a public setting but enclosed in the shell or membrane of the studio. I realized that it works on both levels."

Mailer's commitment extends beyond the project. She's worked with community fundraisers, collaborated with other artists, illustrated Alice Howell's book *Lara's First Christmas*, curated art exhibits, helped secure free space for other groups, and joined the board of North Adams's

Contemporary Artists Center, with which she hopes to develop a biennial art show for the Berkshires. She's also consulting with other towns interested in establishing Storefront-type programs.

While Mailer makes an exceptional leader, she's quick to shift the focus to her fellow Storefront Artists, who share her energy, vision, and enthusiasm, and who are also emerging from studios to foster greater community involvement through art classes for at-risk youth and more public projects to bring vitality to the streets.

Mailer will keep her studio for at least another year. It's where she's experimenting on the centerpiece of her Ferrin Gallery installation—a fountain of glycerin. One of her preferred, unortho-



"Marble Dust Forest: Volcano," oil and marble dust on canvas, by Maggie Mailer.



Artists on display: (l-r) Jeff Winslow, Jeanet Ingalls, Maggie Mailer, Phylene Amuso, Fern Leslie, Scott Cole, Megan Whilden, Eric Drury, Dawn Giftas, Alex Barstow, Douglass Truth, Annie Laurie, Colleen Surprise Jones.

dox materials, glycerin references the clean-up phase of the artist's process; it's used by set designers for temporary painting since it can be scraped away; it starts out transparent, becoming opaque over time; and, as a fountain, it dissolves itself.

It's an apt metaphor for the success of the Storefront Artist Project. If artists catalyze the commercial revitalization of Pittsfield, storefronts become valuable property that landlords could rent to paying tenants. The artists will eventually work themselves out of free studio space.

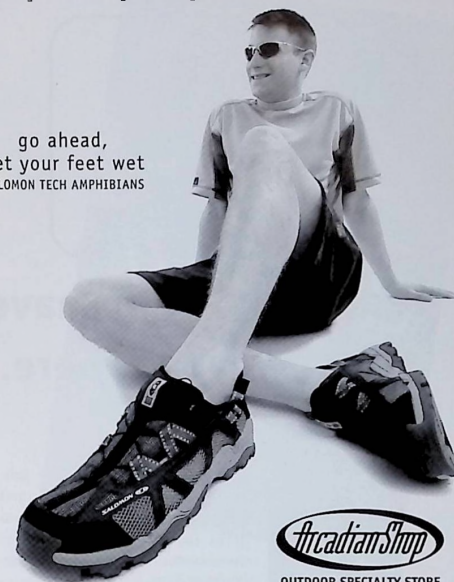
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Painter Annie Laurie has already moved from her street-level studio to the second floor of 311 North Street. After convincing the landlord to rent the former offices as studios, she now manages the space, which is occupied by eight artists. As project booster and Pittsfield's newly appointed director of cultural development Megan Whilden puts it, "As the city revitalizes, there will be an upward migration. Maybe there will be a Second-Floor Artist Project, or an Upper-Floor Artist Project."

Since the project coalesced, new restaurants, cafes, and a theater have opened downtown. Ten Storefront Artists will soon vacate 55 North Street when construction begins on a multiplex cinema, and Joyce Bernstein plans to open three restaurants in one of her buildings. "I think their presence has lent vitality to downtown," declares Lafayette. "It's not the dead place that it was." Bernstein concurs:

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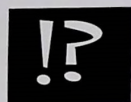
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"Marble Dust Forest #1," oil and marble dust on canvas, by Maggie Mailer.

"The empty storefronts are depressing. Now you never know what's going to be in the windows. It's exciting."

These supporters want to ensure a continuing street-level presence for artists. Bernstein is working with Mailer to establish a gallery in the building she currently occupies. And as Lafayette helped Mailer recognize the need for permanent space, the project has rented headquarters in a Fenn Street storefront. Before taking her new position, Whilden helped publicize open studios and organized workshops to teach artists how to market themselves. Now she's encouraging attendance at first-time homebuyers' seminars, hoping artists can participate financially in Pittsfield's renaissance.

Mailer expects to be one of those artists buying homes in Pittsfield, so she can continue her experiment. "What gets overlooked is this subtle thing that can happen in the studio," says the 33-year-old visionary. "It's this magical realist moment when you'll have a thought or an idea and suddenly it seems to manifest on the street. I wanted to see if the energy generated by artists would feed the street, and I think it has." III

Bess Hochstein is a contributing editor to *Berkshire Living*.

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