

Monsoon Over Manhattan

The latest gallery expands SouthSide Bethlehem's artistic horizon

About a year after Ranjeet Pawar opened Monsoon on Bethlehem's SouthSide, a woman came in to solicit an ad for her church's fundraising booklet. While she was waiting for Pawar, a sculpture of eleven workers sitting on an I-beam at Rockefeller Center in New York caught her eye.

She instantly recognized the center figure as her father; she clearly remembered when he left Bethlehem to do that job. Sergio Furnari, the sculpture's Sicilian-born artist, based his miniature "Lunchtime on a Skyscraper," on a photograph that had been taken of the construction workers in 1932.

"The woman, who had never been outside of Bethlehem, just started crying when she saw it," Pawar recalls.

Pawar is selling the piece for \$1,425, about half what art galleries in New York City's SoHo neighborhood would charge. Pawar convinced Furnari, who lives on Long Island, to let him sell it for less because of where Monsoon is. "I told him, 'I'm in Bethlehem, so he has to help,'" Pawar says.

In the last eighteen months, Pawar has sold seven sets of the sculpture, which has become well-known. Last year, a life-sized version of the sculpture—forty feet long and weighing 6,800 pounds—completed a cross-country tour.

Pawar, 30, has lots of stories like that one to tell about the eclectic art in his fine art gallery—the most

Photo of gallery by Bill Larsen



recent to open in the city's revitalized SouthSide district.

A traveler and photographer, Pawar opened the 1800-square-foot gallery in May 2003, and held its first show that June. He opened on East Third Street in what had been the ice cream shop Udderly Delicious, after its owners decided it was time to move on.

"Monsoon season in India is a very happy time because the rains bring with them a strong harvest and a colorful landscape."

Monsoon sits between Cleo's Silversmith Studios and Gallery and The Banana Factory.

Pawar and contractors spent months making the space more suitable for the display of fine art. They painted its screaming green and purple walls a more subdued white, and installed track lighting and hardwood flooring.

Even though it required much more labor, Pawar insisted the floor boards be installed vertically, from the front to the rear of the shop, rather than horizontally, to emphasize its depth and draw visitors into the space. Pawar also painstakingly handpainted the building's ornate tin ceiling a metallic copper color to bring out its old-fashioned design.

Earlier this year, when the space next door that had been a music shop, Planet Harp, became available, Pawar leased it. He opened up the wall that separated the two spaces and, in September, opened a 1400-square-foot addition.

Pawar's plan is to feature one or two artists each month in the addition. The original gallery will include some pieces from each month's featured artists and a variety of local, national, and international painters, sculptors, and craftspeople. Price tags range from a mere five dollars to as much as twenty-five thousand dollars.

A recent exhibition of work by Frank Wyso speaks to the quality of artists for sale at Monsoon. Born in 1915 near Scranton, Wyso, whose real surname is Wysochansky, was a keen observer of the region's anthracite miners. A self-taught artist, he exaggerated



Wyso never titled his work.

the miners' features while capturing their thoughts in more than five thousand works of art, using pen, ink, watercolor, oil, crayon, and sculptural forms.

Between 1965 and 1994, Wyso showed in more than fifty exhibits in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., and won numerous awards. The exhibit at Monsoon was the first time Wyso's work appeared in a gallery since his death in 1994.

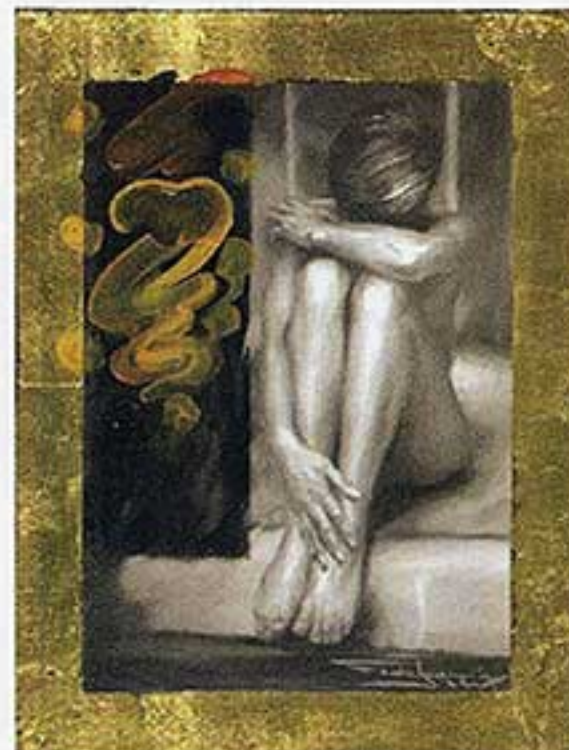
Artist, art critic and Lehigh University art professor Berrisford Boothe says of Wyso: "In his insatiable desire to make art everyday, all the time, and without regard to formal concerns beyond the internal impulse, he clearly fits the bill of a 'visionary.' His best work follows the wind in his mind . . . very brilliant and strange." Although the exhibit is concluded, Monsoon continues to offer Wyso's work.

Other prominent names in Pawar's gallery include Alexandru Darida, the former official painter for the president of Romania, pop artist Kip Frace, and master painter Fidel Garcia, whose museum placements include the National Museum of Spain, the Puebla Historical Museum, and the Amparo Museum in Mexico. When Garcia visited for his opening in October, says Pawar, he was enamored with the Lehigh Valley and extended his stay to tour the region.

Ricardo Viera, professor of art at Lehigh and director/curator of the university's art galleries and museums, believes Monsoon is a critical addition to the growing SouthSide. "Art is so broad and there are so many different tastes and opinions and different ways of looking at art that it's very exciting to have this kind of gallery in the Lehigh Valley," says Viera.

SouthSide merchant Jon Clark, owner of Home & Planet, is pleased that Pawar's shows of well-known artists are driving traffic to the area. "The more people who come down here, the better for all of us," Clark says.

Recently, on the Wednesdays preceding First Fridays, Pawar has been holding previews, and Clark now keeps his business open late for browsing, too. Many patrons prefer the Wednesday openings because they are less crowded than First Fridays, says Clark. "Patrons also like that there is something else going on a few doors down the street," he says. Home & Planet has been open for nearly eight years; currently, the exhibit at the rear of the shop is recycled art by Dumpster Divers from Philadelphia. After November 15, the rear space will be devoted to gift ideas for the holiday season.



Fidel Garcia dedicated this striking piece, *Mirada Interna*, to Pawar.



Karla Stinger's *Trying to Remember* eerily evokes the emotions of its title.

Pawar named his gallery Monsoon to reflect his heritage; his mother, Maina Pawar, is the granddaughter of the former Prime Minister of India, Choudhary Charan Singh. "It's recognition of who I am and where I am coming from," says Pawar. Monsoon is one of the few Hindu words

that people recognize, he says. "Monsoon season in India is a very happy time because the rains bring with them a strong harvest and a colorful landscape. That's indicative of how I feel about this gallery."

November's featured artist is post-impressionist painter John Stinger of Stewartville, N.J. Stinger has studied under painters Ben Elliott, John Slavak, and Elizabeth Ruggles. He spent thirty years in the corporate world as an advertising executive and creative director, but now works in plein air—painting oil landscapes and river scenes on location. He continues to study under prominent Bucks County landscape painter Robert Seufert.

"I am continually awed by the exquisite beauty of this planet and the creative energy it takes to keep it alive and changing," says Stinger. "It is the encounter with the divine creative force that connects all of us and defines our humanity and our art. This spiritual encounter inspires me to paint."

Another Stinger artist, John's daughter Karla, will be the featured artist in December. Her work couldn't be any more divergent from her father's. The exhibition will feature about thirty of her original abstracts, mostly oils done on board and canvas, as well as some of her lithographs.

Karla Stinger's influences are strongly rooted in modern music movements and its potential use in contemporary art. Her latest abstracts borrow the idea of "sampling" in musical compositions and apply it to the process of making art.

"I feel compelled by the idea that music, especially hip-hop, uses sounds from other songs as a springboard for new ones," she says. "I wanted to do the same for painting; create a hybrid where the compositional workings of other eminent artists function as armature for my own visual language." LV

Monsoon Gallery, 11 East Third St., Bethlehem; 610-866-6600 or visit www.monsoongalleries.com.

Beth W. Orenstein of Northampton always welcomes a new place to shop.