

Armstrong inside Ground Floor Contemporary



In on the Ground Floor

A new art gallery opens downtown

BY DANIEL DEVAUGHN
PHOTO BY KELSEY FREEMAN

UPON ENTERING THE GALLERY SPACE at Ground Floor Contemporary, one is immediately struck by a sense of openness and light. Just about every surface from floor to ceiling in the cavernous room is a clean pearl white, highlighting each of the pieces hung on its walls.

Located in the space formerly occupied by Space One Eleven, Ground Floor Contemporary grew out of a somewhat storied collective of artists, known as 21st Street Studios. The group has been led (remotely until now) by painter and installation artist Sara Garden Armstrong, who, for the past 35 years, has lived and worked in New York City, where she made her name as an artist. Originally from Birmingham, New York became her home away from home because of a certain spirit, a passionate engagement.

“New York for me is a lot of interesting conversations and thought,” Armstrong says. “So I think it’s very exciting that there’s this mixed range of ages and ideas and an energy, and that’s really important to me.”

Armstrong, along with fellow artists and

21st Street Studios members Rae Trimmier and Tara Lee, created Ground Floor Contemporary with those same values in mind. They wanted it to be a place where anyone in the community could go to see art, but also hear real people having real conversations about real life.

In July of this year, Ground Floor Contemporary held its grand opening and first exhibition. The show featured an impressive range of all-female talent—Madeline Evans, Elizabeth Marie Farr, Ashley Wingo, Barbara Hirschowitz, and Rae Trimmier, all Alabama artists. It was a rainy Thursday evening—so rainy, in fact, that Armstrong, Trimmier, and Lee were uncertain whether anyone would be interested enough to brave a summer thunderstorm for their sake.

The exhibition ended up bringing out more than 150 people. It was a shocking response from the community, a relative groundswell of support for a gallery holding its entrée exhibition in an area of town not typically known for its art galleries.

“I think we’ve got the artists,” Armstrong says. “We’ve got the group. What we want

to be is really important to you as an artist. That’s the biggie—that is important.”

Armstrong’s deep care for the artists themselves, as well as the family they are forming within the walls of the gallery, is what makes GFC a treasure in Birmingham’s arts scene. Ground Floor Contemporary isn’t a place to simply come and buy decorations or gifts, nor is it lost in a hermetic concern for art-with-a-capital-A. These artists have christened an open space; it just so happens to be one eminently concerned with art and its ability to touch the community.

As Lee says of Armstrong, “Sara encourages us to go beyond our comfort zone, to experiment, because we do say that this is a safe place for us to do things that we wouldn’t necessarily do.” ■

Details

Ground Floor Contemporary will hold its “Christmas Smalls” exhibition this month, where you can purchase smaller works of art as gifts, as well as larger pieces.

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