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Edmund William Greacen, In Miss Florence's Garden

# PORTLAND OREGON'S CHIC PEARL DISTRICT

by Christine Davis

Portland Oregon's chic Pearl District, with its multi-million-dollar condos, high-end art galleries and trendy restaurants, was all railroad tracks and warehouses in 1983. "This was a very working-class district; the railroad era built the Pearl," says architectural historian Eric Wheeler.

With river, ocean, and overland access, Portland became a major shipping hub, he explains. The Transcontinental Railroad came to the city's east side in 1883; and the Steel Bridge spanning the Willamette River was completed in 1888. At that point, the blue-collar neighborhood in Northwest Portland (today's Pearl District) made way for railroad depots, freight houses, yards and dock warehouses.

They lend a distinctive feeling and exciting vibe to the neighborhood today: A medley of squat squarish buildings, clad in weathered brick and faded paint, pierced with rows of large arched bays, and banded by raised loading platforms.

"Spur lines from Union Station on the river brought freight cars right up to the warehouse docks," Wheeler says. "The railroad spurs went north and south, and basalt-block roads went east and west. They were put down for dray wagons, so the wheels wouldn't sink in the mud. You can still see what's left of them today."

After World War II, the area declined as trucking took over, and in the early 1980s Portland began to investigate how to invigorate this undeveloped area, just north of downtown.

Now, those renovated handsome old buildings impart strength and blend pleasingly with the new architecture of today: structures of brick, concrete, glass and steel.

Jane Beebe, owner of PDX CONTEMPORARY ART, took over a corner storefront at 9th and Flanders in 2006, carving her sophisticated high-



credit: Elizabeth Leach Gallery, Elizabeth Leach Gallery presents prominent Northwest and internationally established artists working in a wide range of contemporary media.



Credit Travel Portland and Rob Finch: During the monthly First Thursday art walk in the Pearl, galleries, as well as the Pacific Northwest College of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Craft, often debut new exhibitions.



credit: Travel Portland and Jamie Francis: Old railroad buildings provide the architectural bones for the Pearl. This warehouse has been repurposed for shops and restaurants and the loading dock is perfect for outdoor dining.

ceilinged, light-filled gallery from one of the district's oldest buildings.

But she's been on the scene since the beginning of its resurgence, starting out at Jamison Thomas Gallery before it moved to the Pearl in 1987.

"In the beginning, these were just old warehouses that were cheap and artists and galleries could move in. It was just starting to wake up, and it wasn't called the Pearl. Just NW Portland."

Quartersaw and Pulliam Gallery were already in the district, she recalls. Quartersaw is no longer, it was owned by Victoria Frey, the executive director of Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, and the Pulliam Gallery is now located just around her corner.

A few of the galleries started marketing a monthly art walk, First Thursday, in the mid 1980s,

she says. "People liked coming down here. It was an adventure." It's still a popular venue.

By the early 1990s, the developers came in, building new as well as renovating, and then, from 1995 on, "it happened; a constant stream of restaurants, clothing stores, design stores. Every year, new spaces continue a push toward the river," she says.

After Jamison passed away in 1995, she bought a place of her own in a building that hadn't been built yet. "I hired Brad Cloepfil of Allied Works Architecture to design my first gallery on NW 12th Avenue," she says.

"It was perfect; Brad designed me the most beautiful little space."

By 2006, however, she needed more room and opened her current gallery. Among her neighbors are the Elizabeth Leach Gallery and Upfor Gallery. On the second floor is a private museum, the Lumber Room, and across the street is Blackfish Gallery.

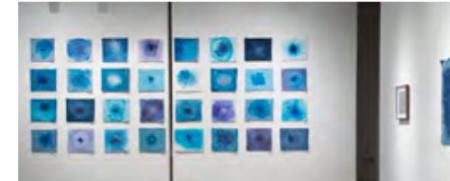
Beebe represents artists as individuals, she explains. "Each has a distinct way of seeing the world and is skilled at doing what they do." In 2013, she was invited to propose an artist she represents to the Venice Biennale, James Lavador, and she often participates in art fairs. She will be showing the works of Johannes Girardoni, D.E. May, Jeffrey Mitchell, Joe Rudko, Heather Watkins and Marie Watt at Pulse Miami.



credit: Travel Portland and Jamie Francis: City skyline with Mount Hood in the distance.

Elizabeth Leach, originally from Los Angeles, started her gallery in downtown Portland 35 years ago, and she moved her space to the Pearl in 2003, explains Daniel Peabody, director of her gallery and president of the Portland Art Dealers Association. "The gallery is an American Art Dealers Association member," he says. "Elizabeth's mission is to bring in national and international art, and export regional artists connecting Portland to a larger art scene."

Take for example, Seattle artist Isaac Layman. "We took him to Miami Pulse, and he got into museum shows at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla., the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minn., the DeCordova Sculpture Park and Museum in Lincoln, Maine, and he was also given a solo show at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle."



credit: PDX CONTEMPORARY ART and Evan La Londe In September 2015, PDX CONTEMPORARY ART showcased the work of Heather Watkins in a solo exhibition, "This is the Only One."

Upfor, owned by Theo Downes-Le Guin, opened in 2013. His emphasis is on new media, with artists working with technology and the media culture, but not exclusively, he says. "We are trying to show risk-taking work that people might want to live with in their homes." And while he dreamed of a large garage gallery off the beaten track, he decided on the Pearl. "Portland is still a transportation-driven city. Better to be a upstart in an established art district rather than be in a place where people don't walk around," he says.

In the past, rents in the district were low, bringing together a healthy and supportive group of artists and galleries, but that's changing, he notes. "I don't know what effect that will have, but it won't be good."

For the past five years, collector Sarah Miller Meigs' pied a terre has served as a private museum, the Lumber Room. "Sarah had been collecting

seminal minimalist artists from the 1960s and 70s as well as more contemporary work for years," says the Lumber Room's managing director, Jeanine Jablonski.

"She's generous and wanted to open an exhibition space to show her collection in a more public way." Meigs collects and shows works in a variety of mediums, with women artists at the forefront. She's also commissioned site-specific works. During an exhibition, the museum is open two days a week and by appointment.

Blackfish Gallery, which opened in 1978, and Blue Sky, which opened in 1975, have always operated under the co-op model. Blackfish's 30 members work in a variety of mediums, and Blue Sky shows contemporary photography.

Bordering the North Park Blocks, the Desoto Building now houses Augen Gallery, Blue Sky, Froelick Gallery and Charles A. Hartman Fine Art, as well as The Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

Founded in 1937 as the Oregon Ceramic Studio, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts moved to the Pearl from the southwest side of the city, when it integrated with Pacific Northwest College of Art. The Pearl has begun to expand eastwards toward the river, and the college, which was founded in 1909, just moved to its current location in the city's former federal building on NW Broadway, which has been repurposed and transformed by architect Brad Cloepfil.

After the 1916-era DeSoto Building was renovated and reconfigured, Charles Hartman shares the same postal address as the previous business, Daisy Kingdom, and still gets its mail, he says. "It's my understanding that the DeSoto used to be two connected buildings – one half is stucco and the other half is brick. They were Portland's first car dealerships. If you stand on the corner and look up, you can still make out the faded signage." LRS Architects undertook the building's renovation, and the firm's senior associate, Michael Roberts, designed Hartman's attractive gallery. LRS offices occupy DeSoto's third floor.

Hartman describes the art he represents as a mix. "I set out to work with art that I love and believe in, and that's 'all the way there' artistically," he says.



Credit: Portland Parks & Recreation: The pocket park, Jamison Square, was named in honor of gallery owner William Jamison who passed away in 1995. The focal point of the park is this fountain that simulates a shallow tidal pool.

Artist Annie Meyer creates monotypes that she shows and sells at Annie Meyer Gallery in another nearby cluster of galleries. "The Pearl used to be a couple of streets, now it's a city," she says. She's served continuously on the board of the Art in the Pearl Fine Arts & Crafts Festival, an annual event, which is in its 20th year.

The festival, an artist-run national venue, is the city's only outdoor art fair, she says. "A thousand artists apply and about 100 make the cut. People like to meet the artists and we are very accessible.

"Our show does well, is well-respected and I'm proud to be a part of it."

And what about the Portland art scene overall? Daniel Peabody sums it up: "Portland has incredible creative and cultural wealth for a city of its size, with a thriving and engaged arts community," he says.

Opportunities to participate abound, through art walks, museum and institutional events, art happenings, arts festivals and community dialogue and discourse. "Portland is coming into its own as a West-Coast hub for creativity, innovation, and the arts." ♦

- Annie Meyer Artwork Gallery, 120 NW 9th Ave.**
- Augen Gallery, 716 NW Davis St.**
- Blackfish Gallery, 420 NW 9th Ave.**
- Elizabeth Leach Gallery, 417 NW 9th Ave.**
- Blue Sky, 122 NW 8th Ave.**
- Froelick Gallery, 714 NW Davis St.**
- Charles A Hartman Fine Art, 134 NW 8th Ave.**
- Lumber Room, 419 NW 9th Ave.**
- Museum of Contemporary Craft, 724 NW Davis St.**
- PDX Contemporary Art, 925 NW Flanders St.**
- Pulliam Gallery, 1927 NW Kearney St.**
- Upfor, 929 NW Flanders St.**