
OLD ROOTS, NEW VISIONS

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As Westport changes, the Artist Collective of Westport works to connect with younger artists and invite them into a close-knit creative community.

On a sunny Monday afternoon, the Westport Library's Sheffer Gallery buzzed with local artists dropping off their work for an exhibit later in the week. The exhibit, *Interiors: A Look Inside*, is one of two by the Artists Collective of Westport featured at the library this summer. From oil paintings to graphic design, *Interiors* is one of the Collective's many exhibits that highlights the wide range of art, and artists within the Collective. But behind the scenes one question lingers: how does a well-established artistic community make space for the next generation of artists?

In 2014, Helen Klisser During, then the Artistic Director of the Westport Arts Center, brought together five Westport artists – Miggs Burroughs, Duvain Montoya, Tammy Winsler, Nina Bentley, and Jahmane West – to create a community where local artists could collaborate, create, and exhibit their work. Though the Westport Arts Center was stationed in Westport, some artists began to grow frustrated by the lack of focus on Westport's artists. "[During] was very empathetic with us. And she said, 'I'm going to create a little group within the WAC, called the artists collective, where you local artists can be a subgroup,'" Burroughs said.

From there, the Collective grew into a vibrant community of 150 unique artists from across Fairfield County. The group holds monthly meetings, and quarterly pop-up exhibitions. Members pay yearly dues of \$50, and once accepted, are part of a life-long creative community. "The nicest part about it is meeting this whole group of people that have this creative side of them in common," said Robin Babbin, a graphic designer and painter.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Westport has seen an influx of younger couples who've left city life for the coast. And while many of those newcomers are attending shows and consuming the art, few younger artists are joining the Collective as participating artists.

"I think everybody's aware that we're looking for younger artists," said longtime member Susan Fehlinger. The Collective promotes itself through media outlets, a mailing list, and word-of-mouth, especially as a way to connect with younger artists. Additionally, since they're capped at 150 members, they maintain an active community by checking in and encouraging those who are no longer engaged to step aside, creating openings for new artists. "We don't know, or haven't explored how to target [younger people] deliberately," Burroughs said. "But I think we're doing better, and word of mouth gets around."

Though it's been challenging, the Collective has had success in bringing in younger talent. Jodi Rabinowitz is a local artist who creates vibrant paper collages. Rabinowitz, one of the youngest artists in the Collective, joined after a conversation with Burroughs, who encouraged her to apply. Though she's new to the group, she said she's already felt its impact. "I've been in it for two minutes and have already benefited," she said. "It made me work in a way that I would have never worked before."

As the Collective looks to the future, balancing tradition with fresh energy will be a priority. With a dedicated membership, and a growing presence in the Westport arts scene, the group continues to flourish. The exhibits at the Library will run until the end of July, and when those pieces come down, planning for the next pop-up begins. "I think [the Collective] is thriving, and I think the harder we push to get younger people, the better it will be," Fehlinger said.
