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# Beyond the Usual

## The Eclectic Charm of a Small Town Arts District

by Barbara Lehman Smith



All photos are courtesy of gallery and shop owners.

Guests at Dragonfly Fine Arts Gallery's 2011 season opening in May peruse works by some of the twenty-eight artists the gallery represents.

“**T**here are moments in our lives; there are moments in a day, when we seem to see beyond the usual. Such are the moments of our greatest happiness.”

—Robert Henri, American artist

With the striking yellow-and-black flags that billow from the shops, prominent street signage, and avant-garde reputation, the Arts District of Oak Bluffs—one of Martha's Vineyard's harborside towns—is not a secret. But coming upon the district after walking through an enclave of quaint, historic cottages or down the few streets from Circuit Avenue, the town's main street, can feel as though you've just been let in on a secret. Part of its charm is the diverse mix of galleries and shops. With the exception of a new gallery—Shepherd Fine ArtSpace, which is located off of the main street, in the opposite direction—the district is clustered at the intersection of Dukes County Avenue and Vineyard Avenue. Stroll with us, as we explore some of them.

In a former single-engine firehouse that has

been painted blue, the Alison Shaw Gallery's large front and side doors and windows offer wonderful light in which to view the works in a minimalist setting. “Everything is mine,” says the gallery's namesake, photographer Alison Shaw, of the canvases, prints, and postcards that line up neatly against the white beadboard walls. Alison co-owns the gallery with her partner, Sue Dawson, who runs the business side of things. It can be challenging being the sole artist, Alison says, because “I have to be continually reinventing myself. You have to give people a reason to want to come back in.” Alison produces as many as fifty new works a year. More than 8,000 of her fine art prints hang in public and private collections. She has won a slew of awards, and an eighth book of her works is due for release in the summer of 2011.

Her signature style involves a photography technique that results in works that look remarkably like oil paintings on canvas. Seascapes are subjects of which she never tires, and that most often attract her eye. “For me, it's the ocean, the water. I mean, look around you,” she says, gesturing as if the sea is right outside the white-trimmed windowpanes and

not a few streets north. Alison also teaches photography workshops, in the fall on Martha's Vineyard, and elsewhere throughout the year, including Santa Fe, Dallas, Nova Scotia, and, in February of 2012, in New Zealand.

As a fine art and editorial photographer, Alison admits that striking the balance between artist and pro-active businessperson can sometimes seem like managing a split personality. In addition, the shops in the district work together to promote and support each other. “We're a group of creative people who are, on the one hand, on a mission to promote the Arts District, and on the other hand, we're all so different,” she says.



A tall white post on the edge of the grounds of Piknik Art & Apparel modestly boasts the shop's tagline “Expect anything.” And you should, in this hybrid of art gallery and fine clothing shop that is a genuine oasis of distinctive art and fashion. Sitting in Piknik's garden, shadowed by a towering metal Walt Montstream sculpture, curator and owner Michael Hunter credits twentieth-century



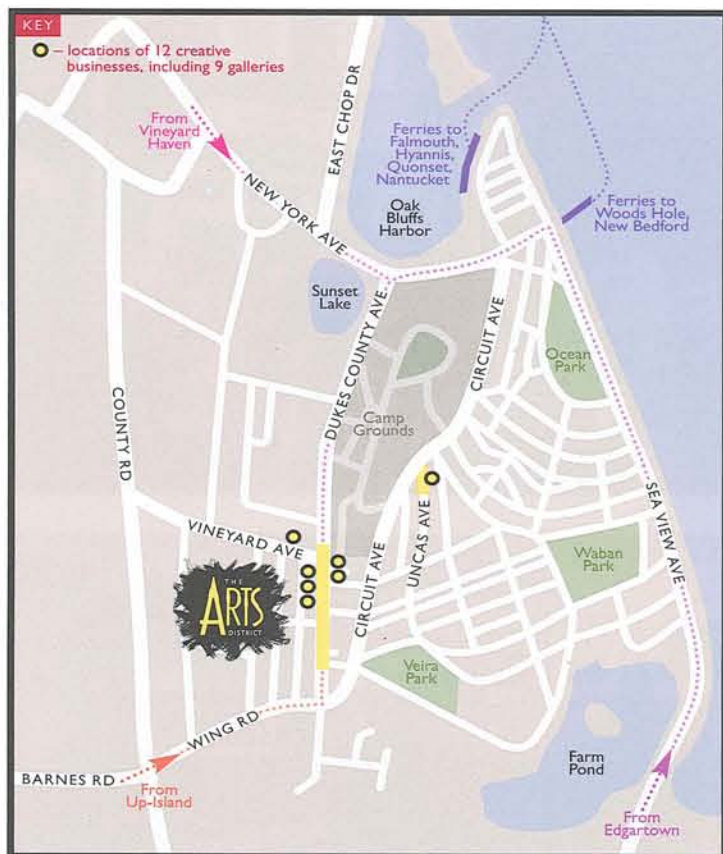
The totem pole sculpture in the top left photo is by Walt Montstream and sits in the garden courtyard of Piknik Art & Apparel. In the top right photo guests gather outside Alison Shaw Gallery at the 2011 opening, and the photo below it shows the interior of Alison's gallery. The lower right photo is of Alison's "South Shore 2001." The lower left interior shot of Piknik shows the gallery's eclectic mix of fine art and fashion.

heir and philanthropist Isabella Stewart Gardner with the store's design. [See the photo essay on Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum on page 44 of this issue.] "It's always been one of my favorite museums," Michael says. He is particularly inspired by the layering and mixing of art with real life

because "it's kind of the way people really live, with things and art in their home."

As for the shop's offerings, "I choose everything," says Michael. "It's instinct. Maybe I find a third of the artists, a third find me, and a third are referred," Michael says of the

forty-plus artists the gallery represents. They include Brooklyn, New York artist Adam Thompson, who last year had five pieces commissioned by New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority, and Anne McGhee, a resident of Martha's Vineyard who teaches at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and



Map by Sue Dawson



The top right photo shows the inside of Amity Custom Ink. The photo below it is of Dragonfly gallery and displays work by California still life painter, Angus Wilson, who originally hails from Glasgow, Scotland.

## Galleries of the Oak Bluffs Arts District

Alison Shaw Gallery [www.alisonshaw.com](http://www.alisonshaw.com) | Lucinda Enamels [www.lucindaheldon.com](http://www.lucindaheldon.com) | Periwinkle Studio 508-696-8304  
 Amity Custom Ink [www.artangelgabriel.com](http://www.artangelgabriel.com) | Perikwinkle Studio 508-696-8304 | Shephard Fine ArtSpace [www.shephardfineartspace.com](http://www.shephardfineartspace.com)  
 Dragonfly Fine Arts Gallery [www.dragonfly.com](http://www.dragonfly.com) | PikNik Art & Apparel [www.piknik.com](http://www.piknik.com) | Stefanie Wolf Designs [www.stefaniewolf.com](http://www.stefaniewolf.com)

is known for her Red Sox-Fenway series of paintings. A recent discovery is Nate Praska, a twenty-five-year-old painter from Portland, Oregon who Michael “cold-called” after seeing his old-world approach to the urban landscape. “I had no idea who he was, or how old he was. I just really liked his work.”

A professional fashion stylist “forever,” Michael reports that about half of his business is from selling fashion apparel, most of which he imports from Italy. “It’s high-caliber Italian, and I buy a year in advance, and try to concentrate on pieces that can be transitional. We straddle the seasons here.” About Piknik’s origins, Michael says, “I never set out to do something slick. My clients tend to come and hangout here. They are not rushed. If their husbands are here, they can sit in the garden and read the paper. My quintessential clients are the husband and wife who both shop

for clothes, then while I’m wrapping up the clothes, they pick out a few paintings.”



Celebrating its seventeenth season, Dragonfly Fine Arts Gallery, run for the last three years by husband-and-wife team Don McKillop and Susan Davy, is a place where artists rule. As artists themselves—Don is a painter and Susan a photographer—they understand the value of having a good relationship with the artists they represent. “We take exceptional pride in how we treat our artists,” says Don of the twenty-eight artists currently represented at the gallery. “You have to like the work to represent it. It’s hard to convince a customer if you don’t really like it. We like our artists.”

Although they don’t focus on their own work, Don and Susan both show in the gallery.

Don, who tends to paint plein air landscapes during the summer, says of Martha’s Vineyard, “The light here makes the difference. I would never paint in the middle of the day. Early morning or late day” are best, he says, “the long shadows of the dawn or when the sun is going down.”

Because their Martha’s Vineyard gallery is seasonal, Don and Susan are able to spend time pursuing their passion—and seeking out artists—elsewhere during the off-season. For the last three winters, they have spent a month in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to be close to the “huge arts community” there. And on a recent visit to New Orleans, they discovered Wanda Wiggins, whom they now represent and whose African cloth collages Don predicts will be hugely popular.

This year the gallery is trying a new system



In the top left photo jewelry designer Stefanie Wolf is pictured inside her Arts District studio, and in the top right photo she is at her booth during the district's 2009 stroll. The arts stroll is a celebration of summer, complete with refreshments, as depicted in the two center photos. "Mechanical Whale" in the lower photo, is by Amity Ink gallery owner, Angel, who is a tattoo artist, painter, and sculptor.

for exhibiting, a change that Don describes with enthusiasm. "We will have all of the artists' work on exhibit all the time, constantly rotating and changing the work out every week." The idea is to both give all of the artists

exposure throughout the season, and to keep a fresh face on the gallery to even the most frequent visitor. ❖

During the summer season, the shops in the arts district are open seven days a week from 11am to 6 pm. Go to Martha's Vineyard Online at [www.mvol.com](http://www.mvol.com) to view a list of shops and calendar of exhibits and events.