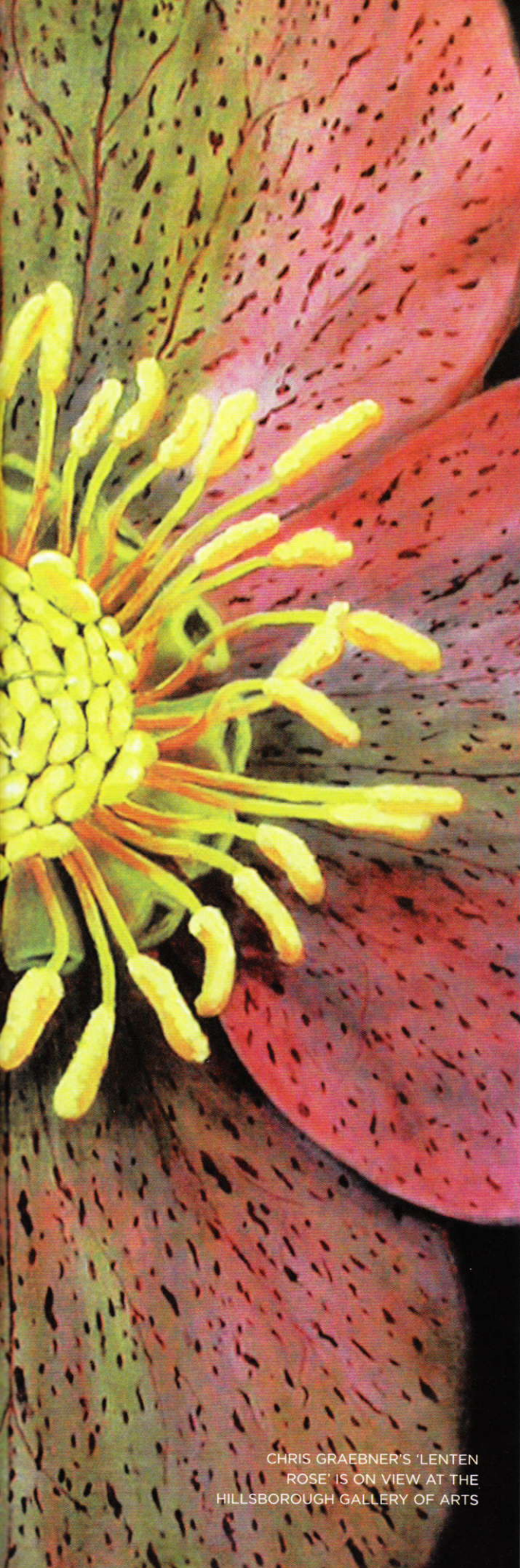
A close-up photograph of a flower, likely a lily or similar species, with large, overlapping petals in shades of pink and purple. The petals have a delicate, lace-like pattern of small holes. The center of the flower features several bright yellow stamens. The background is dark, making the colors of the flower stand out.

Where Art THRIVES

ARTISTS IN DURHAM, ORANGE AND CHATHAM COUNTIES
IN NORTH CAROLINA HAVE WORKED LONG AND HARD
TO BOOST THE REGION'S REPUTATION FOR FINE ART.
BUT THEY'VE DONE MORE THAN THAT: THEY'VE ALSO
CONNECTED WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES.

BY ELIZABETH SHUGG



CHRIS GRAEBNER'S 'LENTEN ROSE' IS ON VIEW AT THE HILLSBOROUGH GALLERY OF ARTS

“The dark walls and the careful spotlighting of paintings makes each seem like a jewel carefully poised in its vitrine,” Greenberg wrote.

A trail of artistic expression connects Durham, Orange and Chatham counties in North Carolina. Clusters of creative communities coexist from Hillsborough to Pittsboro, nurturing a network of galleries that fuel the region’s reputation for fine art.

“Retail galleries throughout this region, by and large, understand the economic and cultural leadership roles that they play,” says Garry Meldrum, co-owner of Turning Point Gallery in Chapel Hill with wife, Jerri. “They work together to support local artists and to attract established regional, national and international artists. The diversity and availability of art equals the historical ‘art destinations.’”

The Meldrums opened Turning Point Gallery in 2000 to demonstrate that traditional and contemporary paintings and sculpture from artists all over the world could harmonize under one roof. Today, their gallery offers monthly rehangings and displays the work of 35 artists. Blue Greenberg, Durham Herald-Sun art columnist, recently praised Turning Point Gallery for its fine art and elegant interior décor. “The dark walls and the careful spotlighting of paintings makes each seem like a jewel carefully poised in its vitrine,” Greenberg wrote.

The Chatham Arts Council formed in 2003 to represent more than 100 local artists who create works in oils, acrylics, watercolors, ink, photography, video, metal, textiles, ceramics, jewelry, wood art and more. “We’ve earned a reputation among local artists as being a positive place to sell their work,” says Molly Matlock, executive director of the council, which is located at 115 Hillsboro St., Pittsboro. “We’ve even begun receiving requests for commissioned pieces from people as far away as Ohio.”

In summer 2008, Chatham Arts Council staff, artists and volunteers fully renovated and expanded the gallery, which has now won Best Place to View Local Art twice from the Chatham Journal and Best Local Gallery from the Independent Weekly. The gallery attracts international and national tourists, largely from word-of-mouth referrals. “Volunteers also serve as tourism consultants, orienting visitors to the culinary, recreational, historic and cultural highlights of the county,” Matlock says.

Hillsborough Gallery of Arts, a relatively new gallery in a very old town, has experienced a fair amount of growth in a short period of time. “In the almost three years since we opened, we’ve grown in both the number of artists—18—and the variety of work—we’ve added pottery and metal sculpture,” says Chris Graebner, publicity coordinator for Hillsborough Gallery of Arts, 121 N. Churton St. “While we are masters of our various mediums, most of us are novices at running a small business, so the last three years have been an education for us in the business side of art, and we are all very proud of the gallery that we’ve built.”

Somerhill Gallery in Durham, known as one of the Southeast’s most prominent galleries for 36 years, features abstract and representational artwork in all visual disciplines. This 9,600-square-foot gallery, at 303 S. Roxboro St., was built with 40 skylights to

provide light-filled space for paintings, contemporary photography, fine art glass, jewelry and other handcrafted items.

"The artists in Somerhill Gallery reflect my life's travel and experiences," says Director Joseph Rowand. "We hear from unsolicited artists and always reply to them. Somerhill has a formalized review process where everyone on the sales staff considers every application based on whether we can provide the appropriate marker. We feature at least 10 exhibitions a year and offer a variety of artistic options with each change of venue."

DISTINCTIVE JOURNEYS

Artists experiment with creations that mesmerize, mystify and startle as they journey toward success. Only when a receptive community embraces their art can the galleries that showcase that art prosper. Residents of the Durham/Orange/Chatham region equate the availability of diverse and original art sources to the importance of authentic Carolina barbecue and ACC basketball. It's key to what makes this open-minded, creative community tick.

But out-of-towners have a role to play as well. A gallery's customer base often consists of patrons from beyond the region's borders. The NC Crafts Gallery in Carrboro, for example, features a plentiful selection of crafts made by North Carolina artists, so travelers return year after year to pick out genuine North Carolina works of art.

The same is true of Hillsborough Gallery of Arts. "About half our sales come from local folks and about half from visitors to Hillsborough from all over the country," Graebner says. "Hillsborough is increasingly becoming known as an art destination, and we have several couples from the Midwest who make a point of stopping in the gallery on their way to the North Carolina coast every year."

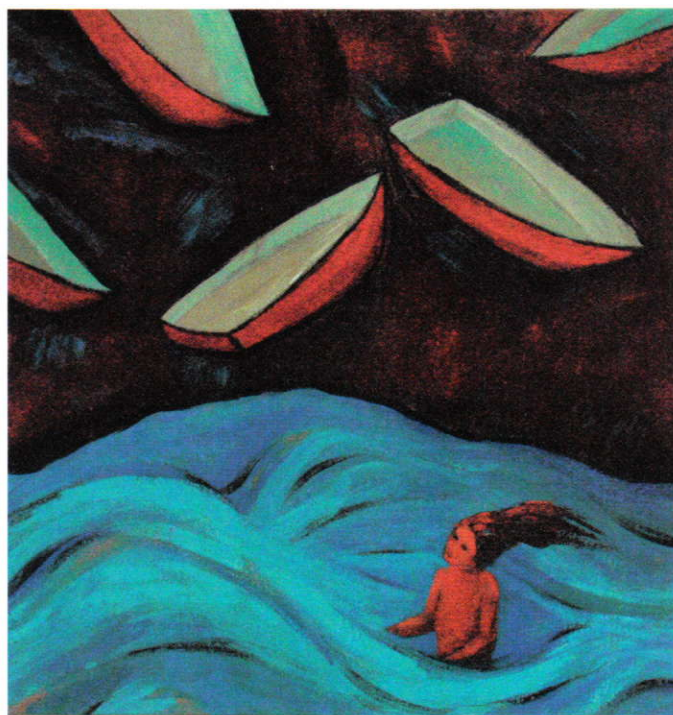
At Turning Point Gallery, the Meldrums display original paintings, limited-edition works, sculpture, pottery, glass, giclées, jewelry and mixed media from established artists such as Maeve Harris, Simon Bull, Wayne Salge, Nancy Jacobsohn, Ned Moulton, Bob Hasselle, Wilfred Lang, Allen Montague, Howard Behrens, Trudy Thomson and Chapel Hill's very own Eduardo Lapetina. All of these artists have helped attract an international audience and galvanize the gallery's philosophy of creating "a pathway to new understanding about art and artists."

Studio 91 in Chapel Hill, where "where fine art and fine wine meet," is the product of gallery owners Annette and Jeff Girman's dream to settle away from the sprawl of their previous home, Atlanta, and merge their two loves: wine and art. They opened Studio 91 in 2005 in Chapel Hill's Meadowmont Village with a focus on canvas art, originals and giclées.

"We specialize in canvas art because it's a more sophisticated medium, without the barrier of glass to keep you from the art," Annette says. Studio 91 consists of 50 percent originals and 50 percent giclées, mainly from established national and international talents such as cityscape artist Michael Flohr, landscape artist Leonard Wren, waterscape artist Anne Packard and plein-air painter Lilly Langer.

Customers return for the boutique wine as much as for the art. "I think what makes our gallery different is that we're not just an art gallery; we're an art gallery wine lounge," Annette says. "We offer

THIS PAGE: PAT LLOYD'S 'MAPLE BURL NATURAL EDGE HOLLOW FORM' (TOP) AND ELLIE REINHOLD'S 'GLITCH' AT THE HILLSBOROUGH GALLERY OF ARTS. OPPOSITE PAGE: COLORFUL WORKS LINE THE WALLS AND SHELVES OF THE SOMERHILL GALLERY.



over 40 wines by the glass, world beers, gourmet cheese, meat and antipasti plates to share. Blending the two, a wine lounge in an art gallery, allows people to enjoy an atmosphere that's warm, inviting and encourages a feeling of comfort while viewing fine art."

The Joyful Jewel, located in downtown Pittsboro at 45 West St., next to the General Store Cafe, features the work of 18 local artists whose creations range from hand-dyed and hand-painted silk scarves to stained glass and hand-blown glass sculpture. Ceramic goddess sculpture, original cards, jewelry and local musicians' CDs are also among the gallery's treasures.

"This is jewelry and art that you won't find in other gift stores—or even most galleries," says owner Mariah Wheeler. "By its nature—the artists' natures—and the care given to each piece, it can't be mass-produced."



Pittsboro artist and North Carolina native Leslie Fesperman runs a small gallery in downtown Pittsboro featuring her own handmade art and glass items, as well as photography by Greg Greiner. Across the street, Vespertine, at 64 Hillsboro St., features the work of shop owner Ginna Earl, as well as Fesperman's glass art, handmade jewelry, soaps and other handcrafted items created by friends, family, and a few other carefully chosen artists and objects.

"The work displayed is very unique and varied, and yet there is a common theme of gentle beauty and nature expressed by each piece," Earl says. "The handcrafted jewelry uses wonderful colors that echo flowering plants and vintage sparkles. The low-fired porcelain pieces have native plant impressions and organic forms. Cards and paper items feature handmade Japanese papers with great patterns. Even the handmade goats milk soap is wrapped in fine paper with handwritten labels. There is a definite focus on detail throughout the shop."

CREATING COMMUNITY

Communities benefit from the emotional and intellectual connections that artists' creations make within museums and public buildings, around parks and throughout schools. Galleries help bring this art into homes and businesses. In all of these ways, artists connect with their community. But some artists do even more than that.

"All of our chosen artists, no matter how close or how far away they live, are personable and have established a local connection with the community," Meldrum, of Turning Point Gallery, says. He cites acrylic painter Simon Bull as an example. Bull has made numerous artistic contributions and visits to Duke University's Preston Robert Tisch Brain Tumor Center.

Landscape artist Howard Behrens painted nine original works for Duke Gardens, and abstract equestrian and landscape artist Maeve Harris relies significantly on the region's horse farms for equestrian art inspiration. The Meldrums reflect the region's connection to horses by ensuring that Turning Point is known as one of the nation's foremost horse art galleries. Jerri Meldrum is also active in local horse rescue programs, and Turning Point Gallery

co-founded Chapel Hill's 2nd Friday ArtWalk, which celebrated its 100th ArtWalk in August 2009.

The Hillsborough Gallery of Arts limits work to its 18 member artists, who live within a 15-mile radius. Because they also run their gallery, interaction with the community occurs daily. "We run the gallery cooperatively and each takes a weekly shift," Graebner says. "When you come into the gallery, one of the artists will be there and will be happy to talk to you about the work on display."

Gallery owner Fesperman serves as the coordinator of the Pittsboro Merchant's Association and organizes First Sunday, which takes place April through November. During this community event, members of the association on Hillsboro Street open their doors for business from noon to 4 p.m. Musicians perform, and craftspeople and vendors set up shop on the sidewalks.

The volunteer-run Chatham Arts Council asks members of the surrounding community to serve on its jury committee. Each artist submits three to four pieces of art, and members of the gallery meet once a month to review the submissions. Upon acceptance, artists can begin selling their art there. The council's volunteer formula seems to be working. "People really care about where they live," Matlock says. "Artistry and creativity are huge here, and the volunteers really bring that in."

The Chatham council also coordinates a student-intern program for local high schoolers, which offers them an opportunity to put in 70 hours of work at the gallery. And every May, the gallery's host to work by local high school students.

And so the region's galleries take care of their own, nurturing the next generation of artists to continue the cycle.

"The owners and staff of these galleries work with one another on public arts steering committees, support of the three major art museums, numerous art walks and studio tours, community non-profit fundraisers, school education support and art therapy programs," Meldrum says.

"This creates a dynamic economic force drawing both locals and tourism and inspiring creativity within schools and work environments."