

## Vermont's Smallest City Goes Big For Art

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By Cynthia Close

Vergennes prides itself on being the smallest and oldest chartered city in Vermont. According to the city's official website it's population of 2588 has managed to support a thriving outdoorsy economy with a typically Vermont focus on natural beauty by promoting hiking, fishing, and boating. In addition, the city has for years prided itself on support of an historic Opera House, indicating that the cultural inclinations of the population are also being served. In this fertile ground, three enterprising women have planted the seeds of what promises to be a richly rewarding artistic and creative environment.

In 2016, two young friends, Justine Jackson and Sophie Pickens opened Northern Daughters (NoDa for short), an art gallery on 221 Main Street in Vergennes. In September of this year they celebrate their first anniversary merging "the aesthetic of a blue chip gallery with the authenticity of a Vermont general store." Their tastefully spare but sophisticated renovation of what was formally a restaurant space has a distinctly hip vibe, giving a nod to the well informed higher end of the art collecting market they hope to woo.

Jackson and Pickens are children of Vermont. But like most millennials they left home to explore new worlds trying to figure out where their aptitude and interests would lead them. Jackson graduated in 2010 with a degree from Middlebury in Latin American Studies. Pickens studied Chinese and Costume Design at Vassar, graduating in 2006. While this educational background appears to be unlikely preparation to run an art gallery – knowing these young women were raised by artistic parents makes this venture far more logical. New Haven painter Anne Cady is Justine Jackson's mother and Sophie Pickens is the daughter of self-taught artist, Pamela Smith. These artist/mothers fostered an ability to think critically about art by asking their daughters opinions, even as young children, about the work the Moms were creating. Both Jackson and Pickens felt empowered, they had been granted a voice in the most important discussions regarding aesthetic decision making. This early confidence building experience reinforced the young women's trust in their own aesthetic judgment. Opening the gallery has provided these entrepreneurial daughters an opportunity to directly support their mother's accomplishments. Both Cady and Smith have shown work in the gallery and are among NoDa's roster of exhibiting artists.

The gallery venture was born as an idea during the time Pickens and Jackson lived in Brooklyn, NY. They had done various projects together all their lives. Now, they were thinking about returning home to Vermont and were trying to determine how to do that and how they might work together. Jackson was first to initiate the gallery idea and finally the timing seemed right to start a business. They worked with the building owner, and drawing on the sweat equity of family and friends, they transformed the grit and grime left by the grease of a restaurant kitchen into an inviting, light-filled space, with huge floor to ceiling windows looking out on Main Street.

In June I visited the gallery and was impressed by the intelligent layout of the space and the exhibition titled *Dear Wild Ones*, a powerful tribute to some of our still wild animal friends by painter Rebecca Kincaid. The inventive welded sculpture of Vermont artist Eben Markowski complemented the paintings. Both artists are deeply inspired by their subjects. As Markowski eloquently stated, “The natural world when witnessed takes your breath away, and when carelessly destroyed ruins any chance we have as a species to continue our existence in a true and honorable manner.” Combining business with philanthropy, Kincaid, Markowski, and Northern Daughters donated 10% of their sales from the exhibition to the Vermont Chapter of the Nature Conservancy.

Pickens and Jackson reflected on their achievements over the past year. They have learned the pace of the business, and made inroads in cultivating a serious audience doing exciting work that they both love. Exhibitions are planned through the fall and they will be giving their artists some New York City exposure when they attend the Affordable Art Fair at the Metropolitan Pavilion from September 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup>.

### **BigTown Gallery Vergennes Joins NoDa on Main Street**

Anni MacKay moved to the United States from England more than 30 years ago. She Graduated From SUNY Purchase with a BFA in Painting, Printmaking, and Bookarts. Ultimately, she decided against creating art as her career focus and gradually realized she was “more interested in creating community.”

Mackay was originally “drawn to Vermont by the interesting creative people who live here.” Her first contacts included the influential documentary filmmaker Ed Pincus and his wife Jane, who lived in Roxbury, Vermont. (Pincus died in 2013 of Leukemia.) Mackay encountered people who were forming “intentional communities” a continuing manifestation of that original late 1960’s-1970’s rush of back-to-the-landers who came to Vermont to “do their own thing.” Here MacKay found the opportunity to “do her own thing” which was a challenge, one she was willing to meet. Through the process of successful “community building” Mackay stated she was able to “become my creative self.”

By opening the BigTown Gallery in Rochester, VT in 2003, Mackay now had a vehicle, a bricks and mortar space to serve as the epicenter, the gathering place, for artists as well as musicians, writers and thinkers. The building itself is architecturally unique with it’s huge, round, two-story, open façade revealing a columned entrance below the second floor deck. It commands attention. It is easy to imagine passers by would be intrigued and would want to explore what such an interesting looking building housed. It would not be surprising if many first time art buyers were attracted by the building, and later discovered their true interest to be the art inside.

The internationally known abstract sculptor and printmaker Hugh Townley befriended Mackay and was among those artists who first supported her venture. Townley died in 2008 at the age of 85 and BigTown Gallery now manages his Estate. Mackay is also the representative for the Estate Holdings of photographer Aaron Siskind and Lawrence Fane, another well regarded abstract sculptor who, like Townley, died in 2008.

Mackay has become a fixture in the Vermont art scene. Her gallery, now supporting the work of 40 mid-career and “A-List” artists, has prospered. Her non-profit arm called BigTown Projects supports and presents a Summer Reading Series, experimental installations, and performing arts events. All are free and open to the public. She has formed a varied and deep network of people and organizations working towards an overarching goal of improving the environment for a “creative economy.” While that phrase has become something of a buzz word, meaning different things to different people, MacKay has worked tirelessly to bring true meaning to a “creative economy” with a goal of serving both rural and urban communities.

MacKay admits it took a lot of experimentation for her to understand how to work with rural communities. She does not shy away from political engagement in order to make things happen. She took part in the Vermont Leadership Institute and serves on the states Planning Commission for the Creative Economy. She cites American economist and social scientist Richard Florida, who wrote the influential book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 2002, as having a strong impact on her thinking. Florida sees diversity and creativity as basic drivers of innovation and regional and national growth.

Vermont holds a unique place in providing a beautiful, nurturing environment for art makers. Creative artists in every medium have chosen to live and work here. But one cannot live creatively without a source of income that is the “economy” part of the equation. And galleries after all are in the business of selling art. One of the ways to build new audiences and entice collectors is to bring the art to them. Mackay felt the time was right for her expansion from Rochester to BigTown Vergennes, which opened in April 2017 at 245 Main Street next to the Vergennes Laundry. Her goals were to provide broader options for her artists while maintaining the high quality of work people had come to expect.

The demure space of the new gallery still feels light and airy thanks to its high white walls and windowed entrance facing the street. It is large enough to hold some impressively sized art, like Hugh Townley’s huge totemic sculpture, “*Townleyberrybush*” included in the inaugural exhibition titled “*The Bakers Dozen*.” The show is dedicated to Varujan Boghosian who at age 91 is still alive and working in Hanover, New Hampshire. His lyrical, beautifully complex collages share the walls with the eighteen other artists contained in the new space.

The mother/daughter connections through art as exemplified by Northern Daughters, also resonate with Mackay. Her 19-year-old daughter was raised in a world surrounded by artists, writers and musicians. This year she is interning in her Mom’s gallery, making this venture truly a family affair.

The future of the tiny city of Vergennes looks bright. Thanks to these entrepreneurial, creative, dedicated women, Main Street is more alive and vibrant than ever.

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