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A daring move

Branch Gallery opens an elegant new home in the heart of Durham

Ellen Sung, Staff Writer

Two days before Branch Gallery opened its new location, the lights still weren't on. Painting and electrical delays plagued the move from Carrboro to downtown Durham until almost the last minute. But even in its raw state, Branch was gorgeous.

The gallery occupies three bays of an old car dealership on Foster Street, with soaring barrel-vaulted ceilings, exposed brick columns and steel beams, a working garage door and white walls that seem to hover just off the cement floor.

By opening night Jan. 19, with the art hung and the paint almost dry, it had become just the right setting for a gallery that for nearly two years has offered the Triangle a portal to the New York art world.

Among the young gallery's frequent visitors are Kimerly Rorschach, director of the new Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Rorschach, who pays attention to the galleries that discover the next museum-quality artists, compares Branch to the hub of New York's gallery scene.

"It's just like Chelsea," Rorschach said. "I'm really excited about this. ... It's great for contemporary art in the area."

The gallery is the brainchild of husband-and-wife team Chlo' Seymore, 31, and Harrison Haynes, 32. The Rhode Island School of Design graduates moved from Manhattan to Carrboro in 2004. Two years later, Branch has already made a splash on the international art market and turned heads in North Carolina by taking a distinctly noncommercial approach.

They don't choose artists they think will sell; they choose work they love and cross their fingers that someone will buy. Like most New York galleries, there are no price tags and no labels because they want people to appreciate the art itself, not focus on its title or cost.

In essence, Branch is curated like a miniature museum.

"There's a level of seriousness and sophistication here that doesn't exist [in the Triangle]," said LUMP gallery director Bill Thelen, who guest curated a show at Branch last year. "That's why it's so fresh."

The problem is that museums run on donations and goodwill. An art gallery can't afford to do that.

"We're not a nonprofit," Seymore said. "We're not a project space. If people don't buy art, we close."

The gallery has just one paid staffer, who works part time. Two interns work free. Seymore and Haynes draw no salary. Prices are similar to those at other Triangle galleries, with very large paintings ranging up to \$6,500, but the profits, Seymore said, are plowed back into the business: to print better announcement cards, to help an artist frame her work, to afford a bigger show.

"Obviously, you never want to be in a position to say you don't want to sell something," Seymore said. "The one thing that can be difficult is if they get successful and they kind of get stuck in this one style. We're not really interested in that."

Beyond the Triangle

They stay in the black because of the outside world. The majority of their art collectors are not from North Carolina.

Instead, they sell the bulk of their work at far-flung art fairs. The booming trade events create a sort of Fashion Week for contemporary art. Tens of thousands of collectors, curators and just plain spectators browse hundreds of gallery booths in tent cities, exhibition halls or even whole floors of rented hotel rooms. The most significant fairs in the United States are Art Basel Miami Beach and the annual Armory Show in New York.

Branch has already participated in two prestigious fairs: Art Cologne in Germany and the New Art Dealers Alliance fair that runs concurrent with Art Basel Miami in Florida. At the four-day NADA fair in 2004, Seymore said, they made as much money as the gallery does in six months.

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Joshua Abelow, an artist represented by Branch Gallery, records co-owner Harrison Haynes hanging his paintings.

Staff Photo by Sher Stoneman

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