

CHRISTOPHER VOLPE

Kelley Stelling Contemporary

“New concept coming soon” reads a sign on Manchester, NH’s boarded-up Veranda Martini Bar and Grille. The phrase could be the battle cry for a transforming metropolis. Or it could be wishful thinking. It doesn’t matter. Art always grows between the cracks.

Locals once dubbed Manchester “Manch-Vegas” because of a slot-machine scandal. The nickname stuck because the city has the gritty backbone of an urban hub. Yet behind its graffiti and changing storefronts, Manchester is home to the Currier Museum and the New Hampshire Institute of Art (NHIA)—both thriving art institutions. Without an accessible network to link these organizations to the daily



life of the city, however, there’s been a certain lack of flow, and little to hold the artists and graduating art students who often head for richer creative communities elsewhere.

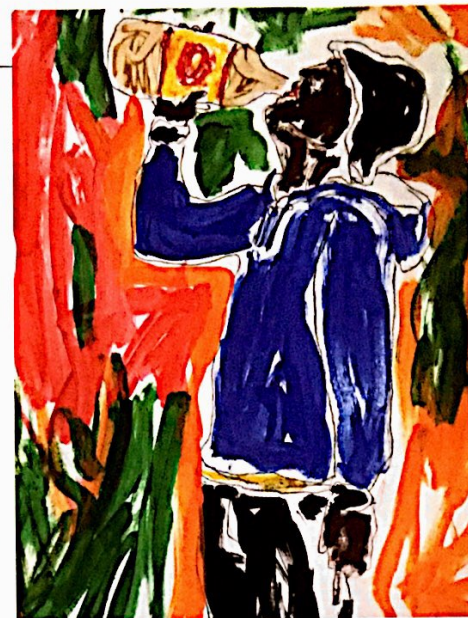
How appropriate then that Bill Stelling, a veteran gallerist from the 1980s New York art scene, has partnered with Massachusetts art historian and marketing pro Karina Kelley to open Kelley Stelling Contemporary on Hanover

Street. Previously a hair salon, the long, narrow space now shows some of the freshest art in New Hampshire. Artists and art students, professors and curators crowd their openings of bold contemporary work just steps away from the NHIA and a few blocks from the Currier.

“We started this gallery in the same spirit that Fun Gallery started in New York,” says Bill Stelling, referring to a Lower East Side gallery that played a pivotal role in the emergence of graffiti and hip-hop art. In 1981, Stelling partnered with legendary “queen of the downtown scene” Patti Astor to create Fun Gallery at a time when the neighborhood bar was CBGB and Talking Heads and Blondie were the house bands. Although it only lasted five years, Fun Gallery quickly became the platform for many of the cutting-edge artists of the early 1980s, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf and Lady Pink. Stelling later helped run 56 Bleecker, another explosive nexus of experimental art, performance, music and fashion, as well as—and just as importantly—legendary parties. By then, however, the ‘80s East Village art scene was decimated by the AIDS epidemic. “We were losing a lot of people,” Stelling says, “Like 75 percent of the artists and friends we knew.” Stelling moved to New Hampshire in 1994.

He met business partner Karina Kelley at a Manchester cultural commission dinner at the Currier. Kelley comes from a family of artists and studied art and art history at Plymouth College. She’s a senior marketing coordinator for a construction consulting firm in Concord, NH, but she also assisted in the NHIA’s French Gala last year and helped take the Currier’s major fundraiser, Heart of the Arts to new heights. She is on the advisory of the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA) and previously served as vice president of the board of directors for the Kimball Jenkins School of Art.

Kelley Stelling’s solo show for Boston artist Sarah Meyers Brent was one of the few installations ever done in any commercial gallery in New Hampshire. *Beautiful Mess* (reviewed in *Art New England*’s July/August issue) consisted of “bouquets” of gestural paint and dead plants entangled with the detritus of the artist’s daily life as a young mother, including sheets, rags, dirt, rubber gloves, bras, bibs and socks. The assembled works bulged, spilled and oozed



Above: John Isiah Walton, *Sipping 80 Proof*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 24 x 18". Courtesy of Kelley Stelling Contemporary.

Left: Bill Stelling and Karina Kelley at the Mixtape pop-up at the Larsen Gallery, Sulloway & Hollis law firm, Concord, NH. Photo: Jay Surdukowski.

wonderfully along the gallery’s floors and walls. The savvy curators paired the assemblages with works on paper. Many of the smaller works sold.

In July, the gallery showed work from a new series by Al Jaeger, a retired NHIA professor and acclaimed ceramicist with several pieces in the Currier’s permanent collection. Future collaborations with the Currier may include an installation of lighted trees stretching from the museum into a park downtown.

On the same street as Kelley Stelling, there’s a makerspace as big as a city block, a raw bar, a gourmet grilled cheese café, and a fused-glass studio in a converted pharmacy. A young artist is opening a tiny storefront gallery (to be named Argh) a block away. There’s at least one independent brewery, and planning is underway for a six-block cultural district. “This was a walking city in the ‘20s and ‘30s,” Stelling says. And the pieces are in place for Manchester to become a dynamic cultural corridor again. New concepts abound.

Christopher Volpe is a New Hampshire-based artist and teacher.

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Manchester, NH
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