

ART

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CONNECTING CRAFT & COMMUNITY

DURANGO'S NEW ARTIST'S HAVEN

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In the fall of 2021, Charles and Lisa Shaw created the ArtRoom in the Smiley Building, giving Durango artists something the community desperately needed—an affordable, collaborative artist workspace open to the public.

They also gave the greater Durango community and its visitors a visual feast. Though divided into 20 spaces by repurposed, single-pane, wood windows from the building's pre-renovation, it feels like one big, brightly-lit, color-filled assembly hall. The space was, in fact, once the Smiley Junior High School auditorium. It's a stunning, cheerful mix of artistry and industry.

Brick walls, iron posts, bolts, and pipes intermix with rustic wooden beams and joists. A full spectrum of art suspends from a raw, unfinished plywood ceiling. A sign in a basket on the floor calls out joyfully: "Today, I shall create." Another on ceramicist Debora Rodgers's table reads: "If you see a cool pot and you like it a lot, just take it to go and send me a Venmo." It sits among bowls and mugs featuring earthy colors and plant motifs.



Piles of polymer beads, gold string, glue, and metal odds and ends lie on Clara LeMoyné's Desert Moon Jewelry table. Splashes of color scream out from Bindu Hughes's "cubicle," where abstract acrylic paintings and watercolors sit on easels or hang among wire mesh shelves filled with neatly organized paint bottles. And far in the back corners stands a "Work in Progress" by Becca Conrad-Whitehead. *La Llorona* (The Weeping Woman), a stark, ghost-like sculpture of gray, black, and white, fits perfectly into its factory setting.

Other artwork covers so many flat vertical or horizontal spaces that color and design flood your eyes like a 360-degree kaleidoscope. Artists create the gamut of work—hand-painted cards, beaded and polymer jewelry, paintings, sculptures, laser cuts, and more. Emily Lloyd of Violet Mae Upholstery works with textiles, and Heather Freeman of The Painted Playground paints and teaches painting classes.

"The benefits of art and creative expression for both the maker and the receiver are endless," Heather said of the ArtRoom. "This space provides a way for artists to connect with their craft while at the same



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time providing an opportunity for the community to connect with and experience the joy of art in their lives.”

The Shaws say this was exactly their hope. “We want a space where the public can wander, see the architecture and what’s going on inside. The idea is artists can both create and sell their work in the same space.” While it’s very different from what they offer in the rest of the facility, the Shaws are pleased with the results, and Charles shared, “It adds a whole new dimension to the building.”

Bindu and her husband, Michael Hughes, a leatherworker, were first in line to get a spot. After teaching art internationally for 30 years, the pair moved to Durango in 2016 and worked out of their garage for the last five years. Bindu, who was grateful to leave the house, stated, “Our production has really expanded because we have a little space where we can go. When we go to the studio, we have three hours of focus. We are here to work.” They are also there to build community and learn from others. Bindu added, “Being around other creative people is very inspiring.”





“This space has such an open feeling, and the community can now experience artists at work, and I think that is cool.”



Sharon Abshagen agreed, adding that getting feedback from other artists is essential. “Art is not created in a vacuum. Artists feed off each other. If you decide today that you’re going to draw a turkey, you have to imagine it. But it’s actually the people around you, the community, and the experiences you have with birds that are contributing to your art.” Sharon paints portraits of trees to “enhance their prestige” and share “their importance in the battle against Global Warming.” Her works of art are sizable, so not only does she appreciate creating and painting in the Smiley Building, but she can also store her canvasses there.

Art marketer and ukulele teacher Denise Leslie, who helped launch the introductory open house in early November, said artist collaboration was at the forefront of the

Shaws’ minds when they designated and designed the space. “[Charles] really wants the artists to figure out what they want to do with the space. The magic word here is organic; it’s just going to happen organically.”

Michael Hughs says the group hasn’t quite coalesced because the space is so new, with so many different types of people in the mix. “Some artists are trying to make rent, and some are doing it as a hobby. So some people might have a different vision for what they want.” But he and Bindu both feel like opportunities abound to promote and support each other creatively and draw in other community members, something Michael loves to do.

“People stop for the art, but we end up talking about all kinds of things and having

really good conversations,” Michael explained. “It’s not all about selling the items on the table but meeting people and establishing connections with them.”

Watercolor artist Christine Mulholland agreed, adding that the ArtRoom turned out better than she ever dreamed it would for this reason. It fills a niche that was missing in Durango, offering a space for artists to showcase their work and engage with the greater Durango community.

According to Chandler Strange, who features nature in her pencil drawings and watercolors, the gallery model isn’t always ideal for artists, especially in this age of social media. The ArtRoom invites a wide variety of people into the space and “allows artists to be in control of their profits, marketing, customers and sales.”

“The sky’s the limit with the ArtRoom,” Heather shared. “One of the things I love about the artists in this space is that we are all on a creative journey, and there is an opportunity for us to support each another and lift each other up. It’s very exciting.” Heather said to swing by to soak in the good vibes. “See an artist at work, meet an artist, chat about their process... The fun is just getting started!” **ED**

For more information about the Smiley Building, visit smileybuilding.com and also visit thesmileycafe.com for information about their quality local food & coffee!

