



An Artistic Model for Neighborhood Revitalization

Gallery Guichard & Artist Lofts

By Stephen “Black Butterfly” Carter

If one has a sense of history and neighborhood gentrification – I prefer the term “revitalization” – Chicago’s cultural soul coast neighborhoods are a graphic example of what an art culture and cultural venues – be they visual or performing – can quickly do to create and re-establish a vibrant community of art galleries, performing art venues, shops, restaurants, businesses, and entertainment centers that neighborhood folk can walk to and engage in.

Suzanne and Ernest Armstrong’s *Quarry*, Darius Lawrence’s *Mo Better Jazz Chicago*, *Studio 71*, and Lessie Vernardo’s *Gallery Opera d’Arte* are currently setting the stage for the *Walk-Shop-Dine* South Shore neighborhood revitalization.

Gallery Guichard and its principals – Andre Guichard, wife Frances Guichard, and their business partner Stephen Mitchell – are similarly sparkling trailblazers for neighborhood revitalization and have distinguished themselves as the gold standard for how community life is re-engaged.

The Guichards and Mitchell were the peach tree shakers and cobbler makers for the revitalized Bronzeville community. Visual artist Guichard has been painting for over 20 years and his works can be found in over 1,000 corporate and private collections nationally and internationally. As the former curator of the South Shore Cultural Center from 1999 to 2004, Andre was responsible for creating a community gallery, where he held fine art exhibitions to expose artists and their artwork to the South Shore community.

The marketing genius of Andre, the administrative acumen of Andre’s wife, Frances, and the business skills and resources of Stephen Mitchell created the perfect cultural storm and business template in re-establishing Bronzeville as a community where visionaries can dream, but more importantly, can execute their dreams.

The Guichard’s dream began to take shape 10 years ago on April 24, 2005 when Andre, Frances and Stephen stepped out

on faith – armed with good business savvy – and opened the original *Gallery Guichard* in an historic three-flat converted row house at 3251 South King Drive. It is one of Chicago’s pre-eminent art galleries, focusing on the art of the African Diaspora and representing artists from around the world through rotating themed exhibits in a variety of mediums.

Last summer, the gallery re-located to a new space, anchoring the Bronzeville Artist Lofts at 436 East 47th Street. The Guichards are partners in the complete renovation of this long-abandoned 1916 building, which was originally a dairy, but later housed the first Black-owned department store in the United States, the Jones Brothers’ Ben Franklin Store.

Gallery Guichard’s expansive exhibit space is now housed at ground level of the \$7 million renovated construction, with artist loft units on the second and third levels. There are 16 loft units that include living quarters and studio space – all occupied and with a growing waiting list. The Guichards occupy one of the loft units themselves.

Presenting Art To The World

This dynamic duo plus one have the knack for bringing to the world art community – no exaggeration – some of the more recognized contemporary artists. Those represented by *Gallery Guichard* seem to find their way into the seasonal and special exhibits at the gallery. Some end up, through a juried art process, being exhibited at the world famous annual Miami Basel under the sponsorship of distiller Bombay Gin through their collaboration with *Gallery Guichard*.

But the Guichards’ marketing reach doesn’t stop at the shores of Lake Michigan or Miami Beach. When next you’re watching the TV mega-hit *Empire*, look for artist’s work represented by *Gallery Guichard* mounted in the interior scenes of the show.

The gallery recently hosted a viewing party for the season finale of *Empire* that featured the works of local artist/CEO

Dr. Yemonja Smalls and prolific artist, Dana Todd Pope. The packed gallery cheered them almost as loudly as they cheered Terrence Howard’s *Lucius* and Taraji P. Henson’s *Cookie*. And opportunity doesn’t stop there for the talented artists who are represented through *Gallery Guichard* – look for their art to also be exhibited on radio celebrity Tom Joyner’s annual *Fantastic Voyage Cruise*.

When one takes in an exhibit opening at *Gallery Guichard*, one gets a sense of the love of the art on display and the care taken to identify some of the finest local and regional contemporary artists and their creations.

The most recent exhibit, “*LURE*” (Love, Urban, Rawness, Energy), which runs through June 1, demonstrates the eclectic choices art patrons have with artists from Chicago, Gary and Detroit; from the mature artists to the youngest at 19; from mixed media to acrylic; from nudes to abstracts; from the self-taught artists to the University trained. Four works of the 19-year-old artist, Chicago’s own James “Drew” Richardson, sold within the first two hours of the exhibit, which is certainly a testimony to the Guichards’ selection process and the value of the art by a seasoned art collecting community.

Lighting The Way

If one has an opportunity to see the preparation involved in an exhibit being mounted, one would witness the extraordinary, warm relationship of a husband and wife team that maximizes the gifts of the very talented artist, Andre, and skills of the business professional, Frances. You might say, Andre and Frances are “ying-yanging” it as they mount an exhibit.

They flow very casually, very easily, while being very respectful of each other’s areas of expertise and experience. Like the song goes, they’re “easy like Sunday mornin’,” yet business-like Monday thru Friday. That flow of positive energy is indicative of 10 years of obvious wedded bliss, 10 years learning to

work it out, collaborate on daily business and aesthetic decisions, and doing it with grace and aplomb.

Perhaps just as important as their vision and decision to open an art gallery south of Roosevelt Road was the Guichards’ decision to turn on the lights in their gallery and keep the lights burning all night as a cultural beacon for collectors, patrons, and lovers of contemporary fine art of the African Diaspora.

This lighted gallery is a visual statement to welcome the Bronzeville community to enjoy, engage and be proud of its very own jewel of an art gallery – not only for long time patrons of the art world, but now for a new body of younger patrons and collectors who point proudly to the Lights of *Gallery Guichard*, which daily lives up to its slogan of presenting “Art That Touches The Soul.”

A vibrant art culture can make a neighborhood proud of itself, can make a neighborhood a vital and attractive destination, can turn on the economic lights for a community, can become a beacon for community development, and can challenge a community to realize its intrinsic value.

Every city neighborhood on the mend should have a *Gallery Guichard* – or find a way to emulate the skill sets of Andre Guichard, Frances Guichard and Stephen Mitchell – so that their business or dream, too, will light up the night sky.

Photos left to right: Frances & Andre Guichard with painting from “Empire” TV Series; Artist, James “Drew” Richardson shows off “Red Dot.” One of 4 sold at reception; BlackButterfly, Andre & Frances Guichard admire work of artist Donna Pope Todd. Ms. Pope’s art is one of set pieces; Gallery Guichard Principal, Stephen Mitchell & one featured artist, Dr. Yemonja Smalls; Andre, Frances Guichard & Stephen Mitchell host “Empire” viewing party at Gallery Guichard.

Don Kelley/DK Photo

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