

The Boston Globe

GALLERIES

This Lexington art dealer did the unthinkable: She started a new gallery in the midst of a pandemic

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated May 27, 2020, 12:06 p.m.



LaiSun Keane posed for a portrait in her studio space, situated within her "historic house" in Lexington. BLAKE NISSEN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Some people would counsel against opening a new business during a pandemic. But LaiSun Keane felt she had to act.

“I thought, just do something now,” said Keane, who opened her commercial art gallery LaiSun Keane in Lexington in April. “It meant I had to use the Internet more than ever.”

The art dealer had parted ways with former partner Lucy Lacoste at the Concord ceramics gallery Lacoste/Keane Gallery (now called Lucy Lacoste Gallery).

“We separated in April at the height of the pandemic, and I didn’t want to wait,” Keane said.

She mounted her first exhibition in her home in late April, “Nancy Gruskin: Life, Still.” Her second show, “Raven Halfmoon: Ruminations in Isolation” opened last week and is up until June 4. Both feature Internet-friendly work — Gruskin’s flat and punchy collages and Halfmoon’s representational ceramics.

Keane was ready for the digital art world. Before getting into the art business, she worked for Unisys, a global information technology company, and software developer Novell.

“I adopt technology very quickly,” Keane said. She has a welcoming and easy-to-navigate website at www.laisunkeane.com. Most small local galleries simply post exhibition images online; some, in an effort to grab eyeballs during the quarantine, have been posting videos.

“We started with virtual receptions,” Keane said. “For Nancy, it was on Google Meet. We have video content, a gallery tour, the artist in conversation.” She also asked Gruskin to create a Spotify playlist for viewers to listen to as they browse the exhibition’s online catalog. Keane also keeps an active presence on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

“If someone’s going to open a gallery now, LaiSun’s the one to do it,” said Gruskin, a Concord painter. “She pivoted so quickly. She immediately knew how to have virtual openings and viewings. She’s very savvy about social media and technology.”

During her exhibition, three collages sold, Gruskin said — a pretty good showing straight out of the gate.

Gruskin was apprehensive about the virtual opening, but she said it went well. “LaiSun walked around and showed each work, and I gave a talk about how it came to be,” she said. “That never happens at a real opening, which is mobbed — all chit-chat and cheese and crackers.”

Last week's Zoom reception for Halfmoon was orderly, convivial, and pertinent to the times. A series of illustrated tiles reflect on the frustrations of social isolation. One, "Time Off and Tiger King," is the artist's eye-view of a light beer nestled between her unshaven legs as she watches "Tiger King." In another, "Geriatric Cats and Coffee I," she holds a mug as her 18-year-old blind cat, Tony, sits at her feet.

The ceramicist, a member of the Caddo Nation and currently an artist in residence at the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts in Montana, gave a thoughtful talk.

Ten percent of proceeds from Halfmoon's exhibition sales will go to the Auntie Project's Navajo Nation COVID-19 Family Relief fund, and Keane has posted a video interview with Amanda Cobb-Greetham, president of the Auntie Project.

In addition to ceramics, the gallery will focus on contemporary art and aboriginal art from Australia, where Keane is from.

Not all art is easy to view online. Sculpture, in particular, can be challenging. Last week, Keane was anticipating placing Halfmoon's ceramic heads on a lazy susan to photograph them from all sides.

"I want to launch augmented reality technology, but I've been experimenting with it, and it is still not user-friendly," she said. "For now, I can put the images together to make a little video."

Keane has a dedicated room for her gallery. "I live in a historic house. It's nice to present art in," she said. But she wants to move the gallery business, perhaps to Boston. "Fall is my goal, that's when we will pivot," she said.

But for now, as society navigates reopening, she has plenty to do online. "I'm sure we'll have a sleepy summer with social distancing in place," Keane said, "and summer is quiet anyway for art."

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