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Ocean Gallery marks 50 wild-and-wacky years on the boardwalk

By Stephanie Citron, Special to The Baltimore Sun



All summer long, even on the hottest days, a gentleman in a tuxedo stands on the [Ocean City](#) boardwalk. Locals and vacationers scurry over to find out what he's up to.

The man is Joe Kro-Art, owner of Ocean Gallery, and if he's not playing boardwalk emcee, he's possibly watching a bicycle plunge from the rooftop of his old, hodge-podgy building. Of all the screaming attractions along the bustling Boardwalk, few have managed to sustain a vibrant and thriving business for as long as the outrageous, half-century-old gallery.

"I'm the PT Barnum of the art world," proclaims Kro-Art, who is marking Ocean Gallery's 50th anniversary in August and planning a summer-long celebration of events and activities.

From two blocks away, the building on the boardwalk at Second Street resembles a colossal decoupage of paintings and slap-dash signs announcing what's inside. Initially, it's easy to dismiss Ocean Gallery as a clearinghouse for the likes of those roadside velvet paintings and kitschy boardwalk memorabilia. But

a few steps closer reveals what's really inside: a massive collection of artwork: pop-culture posters, limited edition and mass-produced prints, lithographs and photography.

Stuff is everywhere; hanging – sometimes two-deep — on the walls, piled on tables, mounted on the ceiling, stacked on the floor and propped against anything that stands up. The vibe is boisterous, carnivalesque, with excited costumers shrieking in delight at their fantastical finds.

The second floor is devoted to private exhibitions featuring renowned artisans like Maryland's Paul DeRemigis. Another, Paul McGee, whose incorporation of luminism into his oil painting has achieved him international acclaim, began selling his work in Ocean Gallery when he was seventeen.



Kro-Art declares that his gallery was founded on the premise that art shouldn't be intimidating, just fun. Hardly the image of stereotypical lofty gallery head, he strides playfully around the shop, greeting customers and encouraging them to rummage through the inventory.

"Ninety-eight percent of people are just looking for something that will look good on their walls; my job is to make people feel comfortable," he says. "The comment I get all the time is 'I don't know much about art'. Well, it's what you like. Van Gogh said that."

Kro-Art insists that his outlandish publicity stunts and events have kept the business alive in the recent downward economy. People simply show up to see what he's doing. There was the bicycle plunge off of the roof (Kro-Art used a dummy, then appeared in the same outfit as if it had been him). Then there are the art cars: his famed Batmobile was the family's old Dodge Charger.

"It was so ugly my kids were embarrassed to ride in it. We were selling Batman movie posters so one night we spray-painted the car black and glued on junkyard scrap metal. It was an instant hit and has been on Discovery Channel three times!"

His brown-and-white-spotted "cow" car, designed by Kro-Art's son, participated in The American

Visionary Art Museum's Art Car Parade. Ocean Gallery's TV ads, intentionally hokey, impersonate characters like Napoleon Dynamite chanting the tag line "Art Sale Baby."

Ocean Gallery's fame has spread well beyond the boardwalk and its satellite stores in Southern Delaware. It has been showcased in a myriad of travel and arts publications, including an avant-garde photography magazine in Germany last month. Two independent movies have scripted scenes in the gallery this year – one called "Ping Pong Summer" features Susan Sarandon. "The writer, Mike Tully, loves Ocean Gallery," Kro-Art says. The other film, "Turbo," shooting in September, will also be using the Batmobile in a scene.

This unconventional business model has served Kro-Art well over nearly 50 years. "Wow-businesses don't last that long anymore; and this has only gotten more spectacular." The reason, Kro-Art says, is that he operates on without any overhead. "That's my whole concept," Kro-Art says. "Everything I do is recycled, including the building".



How did it all start? In 1964, Kro-Art, a recent grad with an art degree, arrived in Ocean City with just a carload of his paintings, aiming to survive the summer from sales so he could paint.

"My father was skeptical. He said, 'selling paintings in Ocean City — how's that going to work?' He told me that vacationers at the beach aren't there to buy art."

Kro-Art didn't agree, believing that when people are on vacation, with their entire family around them to weigh in on the decision, they are finally relaxed enough to take some time to contemplate decisions like art. And there are all these people with vacation homes and need to cover their walls.

"I just figured with zero overhead, I could sell something meaningful to people without any pressure," he says. "I found a way to [be an artist] and pay the bills."

Over the next few summers he rented unassuming spaces; a vacant storefront, the covered porch of a

hotel. By then he was taking in work from other artists to sell. Finally in 1972, Kro-Art purchased a dilapidated building, and spent 17 years restoring it piecemeal, with recycled and antique materials scrounged from abandoned projects and junkyards.

Though Kro-Art still calls it a work in progress, Ocean Gallery's veneer has been cited as an example of American visionary art.

Looking forward, Kro-Art designates interactive media his key medium for generating publicity. "We have a website and webcams, but Facebook is where our customers check in each day to see what we post."

He says a Hollywood producer has approached him about a reality show. And independently he's working on the concept of a documentary about the gallery.

Kro-Art plans to continue hosting his crowd-pleasing "Artist of the Day" event, featuring an aspiring child-artist composing and selling their work on the boardwalk in front of the gallery.

"Their self-esteem has completely changed because they've sold something in a gallery!"

To aspiring artists he urges, "Do what's in your heart. I did something people didn't think I should do and it's still going. But I also don't rest on my laurels; I'm always on to the next thing. 'If you're not the lead dog, the view never changes'. That keeps you special".

If you go

Ocean Gallery, 201 North Boardwalk, Ocean City, 410-289-5300, oceangallery.com

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