

Ruth and Rick
Snyderman
make a home
above their
successful
Philadelphia
galleries

BY CATHLEEN MCCARTHY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
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LOFTY ASPIRATIONS

Enter the Snyderman-Works Galleries on the first Friday of the month, and you have to dodge crowds to see the art. With its soaring ceilings and arched windows, the street-level gallery in Old City Philadelphia, run by Rick Snyderman, showcases dramatic furniture, sculpture and massive paintings. A center stairway leads to the Works Gallery below, run by Rick's wife, Ruth, where an intimate space lends





itself to the closer inspection of studio jewelry, ceramics and glass. Together, the Snydermans' galleries present a heady overview of today's most innovative studio craft and art that has many people talking.

Fifteen years after buying this warehouse for their galleries, the Snydermans recently converted the upper floors into living space and moved from their townhouse several blocks away. "From the moment we bought the building, we loved the space and wanted to live in it," says Ruth. But tenants had a long-term lease, so the Snydermans used the time to save for a proper renovation. The spacious loft allows them to host much larger receptions than before. Now they entertain every couple of months, often moving the party upstairs from the galleries.

When the structure was built in 1866 as a china manufacturing plant, Old City was a thriving industrial zone. By the time the Snyderman Gallery relocated there in 1992 to show larger-scale furniture and art (the Works Gallery joined it there four years later), the streets were abandoned and many buildings were boarded up. But there were a couple of galleries and many young artists were nesting, often illegally, in the warehouse studios. The couple could sense the area's creative potential.

Today, Old City is known as *the* hip, downtown arts district. More than 30 galleries followed the Snydermans to the area and thousands flock to the

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—Ruth Snyderman

First Friday openings—an idea Rick brought back from a visit with Ruth to Seattle's Pioneer Square. He was president of the then-new Old City Arts Association and knew plenty about developing a cultural center. He and Ruth had done it on Philadelphia's South Street 20 years before.

On a chilly afternoon, the Snydermans crowd into the gallery's tiny elevator, which connects to their new loft apartment. Ruth is wearing her "bottle-cap lady" pendant from a recent exhibit and a pair of earrings from another one 30 years ago. "This elevator is great in the winter," she says, "but we still have to shovel the snow out front."

"Well, *we* don't," Rick teases. "*I* do."

They sound, in short, like a couple happily married for 42 years.

A newly-wed Ruth Snyderman opened the first Works Gallery on Philadelphia's Locust Street in

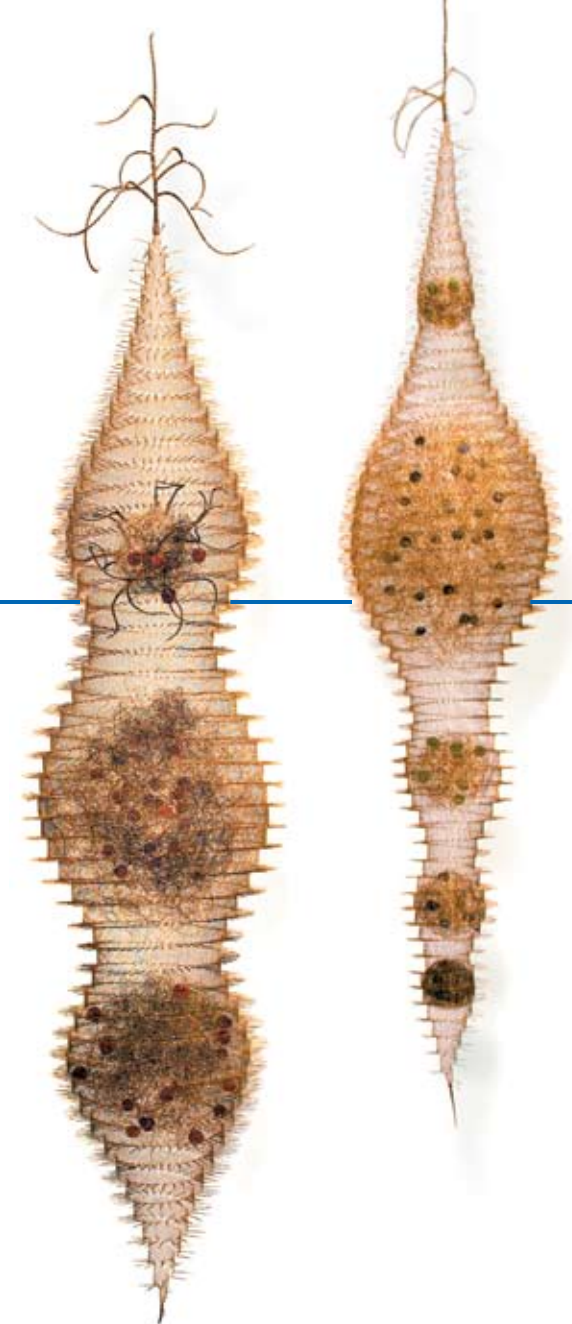


Ruth Snyderman's Works Gallery offers an intimate view of the artwork showcased, including Bruce Chapin's cabinet with wood and resin puppets, top, flanked by mixed-media horses by Cathy Rose. The xylophone with a brush head in the foreground is by Linda Lou Horn. Also at the Works Gallery, clockwise from top right, are this moving sculpture by Wood & Lucker, a marionette by Cathy Rose, and a carved wood and resin sculpture by Tom Haney. A panoramic view of Ruth and Rick Snyderman's upstairs loft and the Snyderman Gallery are on the previous spread.



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—Rick Snyderman



1965, inspired by craft shops she and Rick discovered on a vacation in New Hampshire. Rick spent vacations from his family's financial company driving along dirt roads in Maine with his wife, gathering inventory. In 1972, he joined her full time.

Ruth opened a second Works Gallery location on South Street in 1970. With a little help from their friends, the Snydermans turned South Street into a vibrant arts community, launched the careers of dozens of now-famous studio artists, and helped pioneer the American Craft Movement. In 1983, they co-founded the Snyderman Gallery on South Street to expand into larger-scale studio furniture and glass.

Stepping from the elevator, they enter a loft space as cavernous as the gallery below, but made warm and inviting by eclectic furnishings and exuberant art. The original warehouse's wide plank floors have been polished to a high gleam and refurbished skylights illuminate groupings of ceramics, baskets, masks and art glass.

Like their galleries, the Snydermans' home melds the best studio craft and fine art—with no distinction drawn between the two. “This business of craft versus art has always amused me,” Rick says. “Many of the great art museums of the world could be described as great collections of decorative arts and functional objects, as much as anything else.”

In one corner, an Ed Zucca wood stand, once a Works Gallery display unit, holds glass by Dale Chihuly, Therman Statom and Toots Zynsky—all of whom had early exhibits with the Snydermans. While their gallery is currently phasing out studio furniture to focus on fiber art, their home traces the history of the furniture makers whose careers they helped launch: Garry Knox Bennett, Jon Brooks, John Eric Byers, Wendy Maruyama. They commissioned a bronze-and-steel bed from Gary Magakis

Ruth and Rick Snyderman, seated here in their bedroom, recognize that many factors must go into deciding upon gallery purchases, such as these hanging structures by Lanny Bergner, available at Snyderman Gallery. In their home, however, their personal tastes reign. In the living/dining room area, ethnic baskets sit on a steel shelf made by the Snydermans' daughter-in-law Gabrielle Shelton, above a ceramic bowl designed by Isaiah Zagar.

to complement the original steel fire door on their bedroom wall, and mahogany stools inspired by African paddles from Peter Pierobon.

Glass art by their son, Evan, holds pride of place. His wife, metal sculptor Gabrielle Shelton, designed the stools in the Snydermans' kitchen and the dramatic steel, glass and red-oak stairway. Shelton also made a long steel shelf where their basket collection is displayed. “We had our ceramics here, but the cats got up there,” Ruth says. Ceramics went into the library instead, along with a wall of masks. Evidence



“We have always had a predilection for collecting Philadelphia artists.” —Rick Snyderman

The Snydermans converted the upper floors of their warehouse into a spacious loft. A bed by Gary Magakis can be found in the master bedroom. Overlooking the kitchen is a painting by close friend Isaiah Zagar of his wife in the bathtub. The library offers a view into the dining room, where the Snydermans enjoy entertaining. In the guest bedroom are a candlestick by Jenny Mendes, Native American pots, a tall burnished vase by Trish Inman and a small pot by Nancee Meeker.



Collecting as a Couple

When it comes to decisions on what to purchase for their galleries, Ruth and Rick Snyderman have found the key is to keep things separate. Rick makes the decisions for the Snyderman Gallery, and Ruth for the Works Gallery. Each has a gallery manager to help; neither consults the other. "That way, we don't have to argue. It works better," says Ruth. "For our own collecting, we work together."

When the Snydermans have to select pieces for a joint exhibit at both galleries, such as their fiber shows, or for a national event such as SOFA, they have a three-way brainstorming session with gallery director Bruce Hoffman. "With the galleries, it's not just about our personal taste," Ruth explains. "It's about the importance of the work to be shown."

Occasionally, they buy something from an artist they represent. "If a piece is here for a while and we really feel we have to have it, then we buy it," Ruth says. "But we always give the public the first chance."

Making buying decisions for their home is never a problem. Unless it's a gift from one to the other, they buy only what they both love and rarely disagree. And if they do? "We don't get it," Ruth says simply. "We really don't have room to buy more anyway."—c.m.



"For us, it's always been more about the emotional attachment than the intellectual." —Rick Snyderman

of the cats' teeth marks a corner of the coffee table by Bob Trotman.

While most of the artists the Snydermans represent are national or international, much of the art they live with is locally made. Lighting artist Harry Anderson, for example, one of the Philadelphia Dumpster Divers, made the whimsical lamps of found objects and blown glass found throughout the house. "We have always had a predilection for collecting Philadelphia artists," Rick says. "I don't think they get the respect they deserve. Their work has quality and significance—and that's true now more than ever."

Early paintings, collage and sculpture by Philadelphia mosaic artist Isaiah Zagar cover the living room walls. They tell the story of a friendship that goes back to the 1960s, when Isaiah and Julia Zagar opened the Eye's Gallery on South Street (which they still own today) and the Snydermans lived above their gallery across the street—for \$67.50 a month. Together, the two young couples started the popular open-air craft market known as Head House Square to attract customers to the South Street area. Today, Isaiah's 1970 painting of his wife in the bathtub looks down on the Snydermans' new kitchen, where the four of them frequently gather to talk art and reminisce.

"It was an interesting time. The center of Philadelphia was a nowhere place to be. Anything was possible because no one was paying attention to it," Rick says. "The craft movement was very humble and grassroots at the beginning, but we watched it become broader, deeper and more complex. We have always been interested in advancing the development of the creative processes, but also in the power of everyday objects. For us, it's always been more about the emotional attachment than the intellectual." ●

CATHLEEN MCCARTHY writes about art and travel from Philadelphia, where she attends First Friday openings and saves plenty of time for the Snyderman-Works Galleries.



The light-filled Snyderman Gallery offers plenty of room to showcase massive paintings, dramatic furniture and sculptures such as this one by Henry Royer, or the mesh basket at left, by Lanny Bergner.