BY DIAN PARKER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WEST BRANCH GALLERY & SCULPTURE PARK

A Vivid and Vibrant World of Art

Great work flourishes at West Branch Gallery & Sculpture Park



ART IS A TRICKY BUSINESS.

Viewing art can also be tricky, but only because there is so much hype around the art world. What is good often equates to what is selling. Art that is expensive is supposed to be the best—the more costly, the better. Amidst all this, there is you, the viewer, and the art before your eyes. The work of art and you are in an intimate relationship that is private. We are fortunate, therefore, to be offered many moments to explore our relationship with art in one of the very best galleries in Vermont—West Branch Gallery & Sculpture Park in Stowe.

West Branch exhibits contemporary abstract paintings and sculptures, as well as representational landscape painting, still life, and marble sculpture. With a total of 3,400 square feet, there is plenty of opportunity in the gallery's labyrinth of rooms to lose yourself in art.

West Branch Gallery was two indoor tennis courts when Chris Curtis and Tari Swenson (husband and wife) first bought the building in the early 1980s. Chris made one corner of the building into his sculpture studio, and Tari, a calligrapher and painter, had a studio at the other end. Tari says, "Chris would make big stone sculptures, and people from the bike path would drop into our cavernous warehouse and find Chris welding away or wailing on a piece of stone with a chisel. It was great fun introducing them to the making of art."

Chris was born and raised in Stowe. He and Tari met in 1973 (they now have two grown children). At first, to support their art interests, the couple had a small wholesale art business manufacturing words in stone, using both their skills as

Clockwise from left: Richard Erdman's *Venturi* takes center stage, with Craig Mooney's landscape, *Winding River at Sunset*, to the right, and the sculpture park outside to the left. *Simpatico*, cast bronze by Chris Curtis, with mixed media by Janet Fredericks on the walls. Karen Peterson's cast bronze *Kenya*, with Marc Civitarese's *Seeing You Again* and *Place Where I Stand*, both oil and wax on linen. David Stromeyer's *Thin Red Line*.









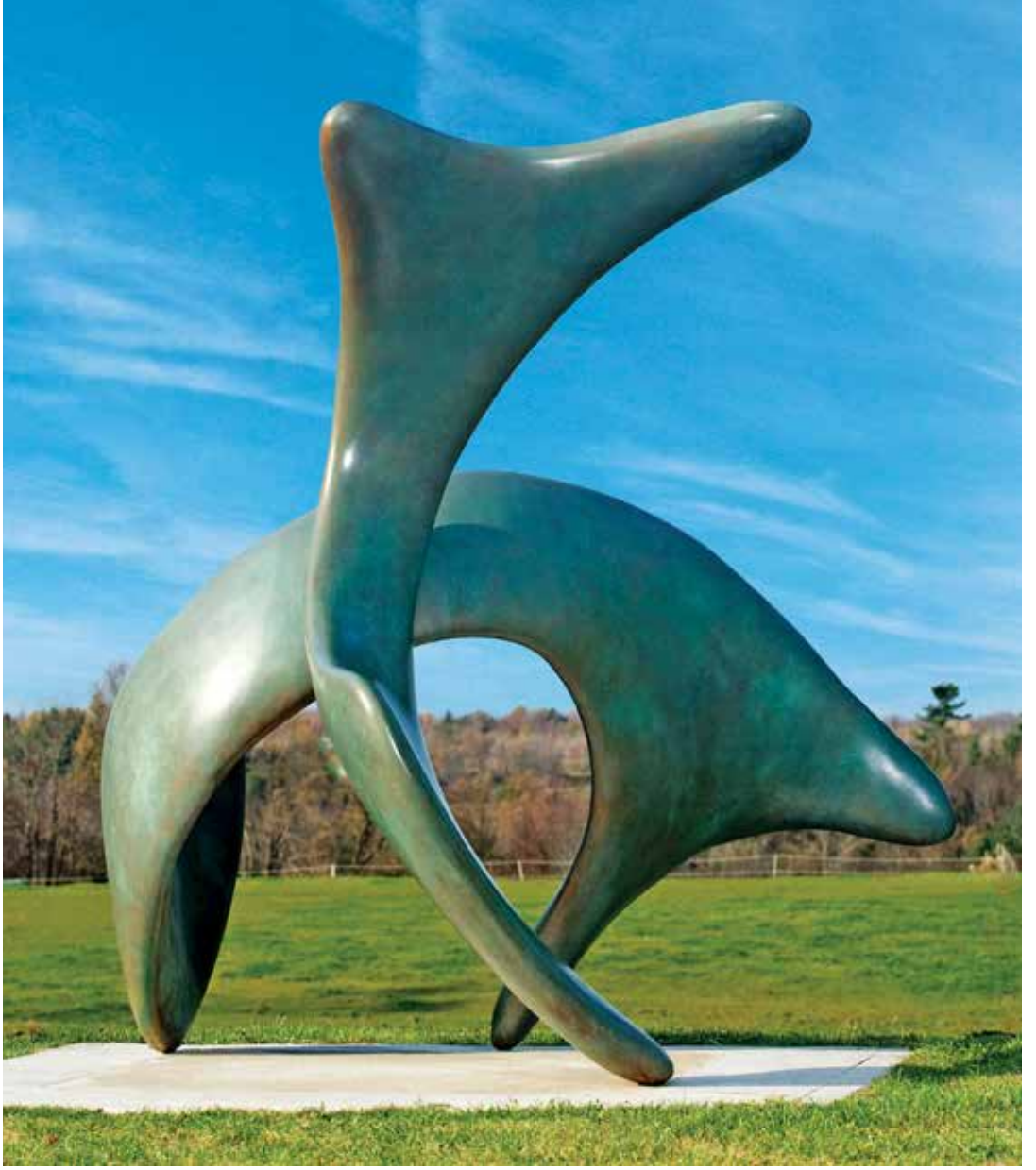
sculptor and calligrapher. Chris also ran the Black Magic Chimney Sweep business for a number of years. Tari says, "We enjoyed the people we met, many of them artists. We started informally hanging works by Vermont artists, and it was exciting to see

Clockwise from bottom left: *Light Ring* by Bruce White, stainless steel and granite. *Toulouse* by Richard Erdman, bronze. *Zipper* by Chris Curtis, granite.

large abstract pieces in an industrial-looking space. It grew naturally from there. We became a gallery. The day after we officially opened, a wonderful collector bought a piece from the sculpture park. We've been busy ever since."

That client has become one of the most devoted collectors of Chris's work. "It was all so organic," Tari says. "We felt comfortable talking to clients, and because we were artists ourselves, we understood other artists."

As you wander through the gallery, it's easy to talk with Tari about art. There is no pressure to buy, but rather a sincere love of art and a passionate desire to share that love with whomever comes through the doors. She continues, "It all goes back to respecting the art, respecting the artist, and respecting the viewer. It really is that simple."









A close-up of Tad Spurgeon's *Cheeses,* oil on linen. *Winter River* by Kathleen Kolb, oil.

Chris and Tari have made art their business. In spite of the 2008 recession and the decline in art sales at Christie's and Sotheby's, West Branch has continued to grow. "We've been open as a gallery now for 14 years. During the recession we tightened our belts but remained open, even deciding to expand. We wanted to maintain the confidence of our clients and honor our artists," Tari says.

In 2013, 65 percent of sales at West Branch were sculptures. In their three-acre sculpture park, you can walk around large bronze horses, gaze through a hole in a 30-foot piece of carved granite, or crane your neck up to sweeping lines of blue steel. At present there are 25 large-scale outdoor sculptures. On a lazy summer's afternoon, you can be suspended out of time, wending your way along the nearby river, contemplating the still majesty of works in stone.

Chris, one of the 30 West Branch sculptors, pays local farmers for their large rocks, much to their amusement. In his Barre studio he cuts the stone with a diamond wire saw. He has two assistants who help weld metal and polish the stone.





Top: A new wing that opened in March 2014 is dedicated to traditional representational paintings. Bottom, left wall: Three oil paintings by Henry Isaacs. Center: *Comfort* by Karen Petersen, cast bronze. Right wall: *Into the Valley* by Craig Mooney. Isaacs and Mooney's show, *Distinctions Between Color and Light*, opens on June 28, with a reception at 6pm. Opposite top: Sculptor Chris Curtis and artist Tari Swenson, husband and wife, own West Branch Gallery & Sculpture Park. Opposite bottom: View of the gallery from the sculpture park.

"I've always been in love with stone. In it I find archetypes, iconic shapes, proportions, textures, and surfaces that appeal to me and to others," Chris says. A sculptor for 40 years, he's always been interested in using science and technology for the creation of sculpture. Recently he's been working in bronze, with its glimmering golden patinas.

IMMERSE YOURSELF IN ANOTHER WORLD

One mile north of the village of Stowe, up the Mountain Road, on the right is the striking green sign for West Branch Gallery. As you drive into the parking lot, the first thing you see is a large hanging stainless steel ring, a sculpture by Bruce White titled *Light Ring.* It is a massive 156 inches in diameter. Next to it is an oversized bronze piece, *Toulouse,* by Richard Erdman, 96 inches high. Just beyond in the grass is a Chris Curtis stone sculpture titled *Zipper*. It consists of two huge slabs of granite that have been cut apart, like steps, and could fit back together perfectly—a gigantic zipper.

Inside, after walking down a hall filled with paintings, you enter the main gallery. To the right is a deep blue wall, inviting you to enter the Landscape Traditions wing. On the wall is a shimmering blue landscape, *Winter River,* an oil painting by Kathleen Kolb. Continuing on, you come to a sienna wall with compelling paintings. One is an oil painting by Tad Spurgeon titled *Cheeses,* a masterful work, much like a 17th century Dutch still life.

"I did research into older painting methods and materials, formulating and testing a great many different approaches," Spurgeon says. "In the last four years I've written a book about what I learned, called *Living Craft, A Painter's Process."* The book, also a work of art, sits on a pedestal next to a group of his paintings, begging to be browsed.

In the main gallery are luminous pastels by Mallory Lake, exotic mixed media drawings by Giovanna Cecchetti, Jessie Pollock's textured encaustic paintings, and many more exciting works by West Branch's 50 artists. The large landscape oil paintings by Craig Mooney, with their sweeping skies, are epic, like *Winding River at Sunset.* Throughout the gallery are a number of Karen Petersen's deeply moving bronze sculptures, such as *My Gift (Mother & Child).* In the upstairs gallery are vivid watercolors by Tom Cullins. Some are painted in delightful periwinkle





blue, inspired by his travels in Greece. You can see in the clean lines the influence of his 40 years as an architect.

West Branch's highly anticipated art openings are events that should not be missed. At these extravaganzas you can view the newest art exhibit, listen to a live soft-jazz trio, eat delectables from Susanna's Catering, and listen to a gallery talk by an art historian or curator. These are lively parties that host up to 300 folks, even on a stormy winter's evening. "We are in the business to support artists," Tari says. "We want people to feel comfortable coming in. We treat everyone the same, whether they buy or not."

West Branch Gallery is a place to absorb art and draw your own conclusions, away from the crowds and hovering gallery own-





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SUMMER SHOWS AND OPENINGS AT WEST BRANCH GALLERY & SCULPTURE PARK

West Branch introduces their new gallery wing, **Landscape Traditions**, exhibiting nine representational artists.

THROUGH JUNE 17
Rebecca Kinkead: *Local Color* – joyful energetic oils of Vermont life in spring.

Tom Cullins: *Recent Works* – light informed abstractions that reflect the aesthetics of place.

JUNE 28 – AUGUST 9
Henry Isaacs & Craig Mooney: *Distinctions Between Color and Light* – exuberant landscapes of the countryside and water's edge. Opening Reception: June 28, 6pm. Gallery talk by Daniel Kany at 7pm.

JUNE 28 – AUGUST 9
Nissa Kauppila: *Bird on the Wing* – Exploring the delicacy of life, flight, and chaos. Opening Reception: June 28, 6pm.

AUGUST 16 – OCTOBER 25
Chris Curtis, Paul Schwieder, and **Duncan Johnson:** *Stone, Glass, and Wood* – Opening Reception: August 16, 6pm.

ers. Art is essential. It offers untold hours of immersion into other worlds. As the great art critic Jed Perl wrote, "An artist's vision is a solitary kingdom." You can enter that kingdom at West Branch, with plenty of room, light from huge windows, and an opportunity for solitude and companionship with dynamic art.

West Branch Gallery & Sculpture Park
17 Towne Farm Lane
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