

Local picture isn't always rosy, artists say

Battling a market flooded with readily available reproductions proves challenging, they say

By Evan Caldwell
INBUSINESS WRITER

Kalso ceramic artist Nan Niiranen's work keeps her hands dirty seven days a week.

She spends about five days cleaning area houses during the day to make ends meet. The rest of the time, she is hand-throwing ceramics and marketing her work.

"I'd rather work 60 to 80 hours a week for myself at poverty level than work for someone else," Niiranen said. "I don't like the pressure of the corporate chains."

Instead, she said, she creates time for her art — both making it and marketing it — which adds up to about 25 percent of her income.

"It breaks my heart to see the arts not supported," she said. "People don't get that when they go to Wal-Mart and buy a print made in China, they're not supporting local artists."

Many gift items, such as prints, pottery and sculptures, cost less than \$50 at the Broadway Gallery in downtown Longview, Niiranen said. "But local art is not being appreciated much," she said.

"People see the word

'gallery' and think it's too ritzy, but it's really not," Niiranen said.

The challenge for area artists is to get people to recognize more visual art, she said.

Kalama artist Katie Berggren knew how tough it was to make ends meet as a fine artist, so, as a back-up, she studied graphic design at Central Washington University in Ellensburg.

Berggren started drawing as a small child and said she always knew she would be an artist. To support that dream and help pay the bills, she started a Web site and logo design business after college.

Then, "I started doing limited editions of computerized drawings, but people wanted originals," she said, noting that original computerized drawings are hard to explain to customers who want the real thing.

She switched to colored pencil and recently to painting. "I do my own marketing and put in more than 30 hours a week before I had kids," she said. "You have to do a lot more than sit at home and paint."



Bill Wagner / InBusiness



Nan Nilranen sets up some of her finished raku pottery in the Broadway Gallery in downtown Longview in June. 'Local art is not being appreciated much,' Nilranen laments.

At left, Katie Berggren works on a painting titled 'Lurking' in her Kalama home. 'Local artists aren't always that visible,' Berggren says.

Greg Ebersole / InBusiness

Challenges: 'It's tough work'

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Berggren, who has been in business as a professional artist for about three and a half years, said she has never lost money in her profession, adding that design business yields the most income. Most of her design clients are small businesses from Vancouver to Longview.

Berggren said she is noticing more and more people attending local art festivals, such as the Kalama Art Walk in June. However, local artists are always battling a market flooded with readily available reproduction prints from famous scenes and paintings.

"Local artists aren't always that visible," she said. "But people are starting to make that connection between art they see and the local artist."

Woodland artist Debby Neely said most people see the typical artist as a person in a New York loft in front of an easel.

"The reality is that we're all over in basements throughout Longview and Woodland," said Neely, an art teacher at Lower Columbia College and Clark College in Vancouver.

The art teacher still tries to balance her time to allow her to design, make and sell her black-and-white prints.

Neely, who has work in seven area galleries, calls her life and job "wonderful."

"It's like any other job. If you like it, it doesn't seem like a sacrifice," she said. "But it takes a willingness to keep plugging away to survive."

Neely said she makes enough to get by, through selling her art, working as a teacher and operating a design business.

It took a couple years before her art became profitable, she said.

"We, as artists, have trouble settling into a medium," Neely said. "Artists who are successful find a media and constantly reinvent themselves within it."

However, Neely said, successful artists also balance that with managing their business: doing accounting, calling galleries, transporting finished works and attending shows.

"It's tough work," Neely said. "There's a fine line between doing what you want to do and doing what will sell."