

The New York Times

Where's the Art? In Hamptons Center, Look Behind the Wall



Toni Ross, a Hamptons artist, with her piece, "Do Not Look Behind This Wall: A Response to Denial," at the Southampton Arts Center
Credit Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

By **JAMES BARRON**

FEB. 26, 2017

SOUTHAMPTON, N.Y. — “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down,” a Robert Frost poem says. Toni Ross did not want to tear a wall down, she just wanted to cut into one, creating a little window to expose what was behind it — copies of sculptures by Renaissance masters.

Ms. Ross, the Toni of Nick & Toni’s, a restaurant that is a command post for the see-and-be-seen crowd in the Hamptons, doubles as an artist. She was preparing for a group show in an Italianate warren that began in the late 19th century as the Parrish Art Museum, another stop on the Hamptons celebrity circuit. The Parrish moved to striking modern quarters a few miles away in 2012. The old building, owned by the Village of Southampton, became the home of the Southampton Arts Center.

Now, Ms. Ross says a simple idea — slicing through the interior wall at one end of a gallery — “turned into a really complicated situation.”

The matter started when she stopped by the museum several months ago “to scope out the room.” She inspected the wall, which she had not remembered from past visits. She thought of cutting a narrow hole in it and installing string around the opening so “it would look like the wall was being pulled apart by the string.”

Arts center officials referred the idea to Village Hall, where it was turned down.

“When I asked why, they had concerns about me cutting through the center post of the wall,” Ms. Ross said. “They thought I would compromise the wall, but it’s nonstructural, it’s two-by-fours, it’s Sheetrock. It had nothing to do with the original building.”

She offered to return the wall to its original condition after the show and even replace the entire wall if necessary. After a carpenter who has worked with her on past installations told her that little more than a patch would be required, Ms. Ross decided to try again, sending a more detailed proposal and calling Mayor Mark Epley.



Ms. Ross preparing a piece for the exhibition on Tuesday. She had originally wanted to cut a hole in the wall to expose the altar behind it, but the plan was vetoed by the village council. Credit Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

“I said, ‘Maybe there wasn’t a full understanding of what I wanted to do — I’ll submit drawings,’” she said. “He said he would look at it: ‘Great, drop them off.’”

The next thing she heard was that her proposal had been rejected once again — this time, she said, “on the grounds that it would set a precedent that they didn’t like.”

The precedent, according to the village administrator, Stephen Funsch, had to do with what would happen after the exhibition.

Cutting a hole in the wall would mean “a tremendous amount of repair work,” Mr. Funsch said, “and we’re very short-staffed and we do all this work at no charge to the arts center. We decided we’re not going to cause more work for our staff.”

He acknowledged that Ms. Ross had offered to have the wall repaired at her expense, but when outside contractors do such work, he said, “it’s not up to the caliber we need.”

“Everyone says they can do something,” he said. “Past experience has been negative experience.”

Ms. Ross said she could understand the qualms if the wall had not been cut into before. But it had. She knew that from a book in the Rogers Memorial Library, not far from the arts center.

“The first page is a photograph of an exhibition in 1993 with a giant hole cut in the wall,” she said. “And it’s gorgeous, this very cool trapezoidal opening much, much larger than what I wanted to do.”

Behind the wall, she said, “you could see the angels’ faces and the feet of Mary, and maybe Joseph.”



Ms. Ross installed a mirror behind the wall, which helps to better show off the sculptures. Credit Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

The figures were part of an altarlike structure that reaches from the floor almost to the ceiling. It was commissioned by the Parrish's founder, Samuel Longstreth Parrish, a Europhile whose life straddled the 19th and 20th centuries, when most American art collectors scoured Europe and brought home items that suited their fancy.

Not all were treasures. Some contemporary critics scolded Parrish for having accumulated plaster casts of masterpieces, not the masterpieces themselves. But in Parrish's day, when photography was cumbersome and foreign travel a luxury, there was value in plaster reproductions: The public learned the canon of classic art from seeing plaster reproductions of ancient statuary.

"He was trying to make a little Metropolitan Museum," said Donna De Salvo, now the deputy director for international initiatives and senior curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan.

She is an authority on contemporary art with a long list of exhibitions and catalogs to her credit, but her résumé often omits a detail: She is also an authority on the wall at the Parrish. She wrote the book with the photograph that was in the library. And 24 years ago, she assembled an exhibition at the Parrish about the Parrish — and decided to find out what was behind the wall, which was then more like a box that closed off the figures behind from all sides.

"We drilled a hole," she recalled last week. "We got a flashlight, and there it was." Her book described it as a "composite altarpiece" with countless angels on four levels, each a copy of a work by Donatello, Lorenzo Ghiberti or the two della Robbias, Luca and his nephew Andrea.

After the 1993 exhibition, she said, she had that wall removed and along with it an unsightly radiator. In its place went the current wall, a single flat panel with no sides, so museumgoers who nosed in close could get a glimpse of the altar.

"It's a wall," Ms. De Salvo said. "It has no historic validity to it. It's just drywall. It was something that we put up once we took down the other wall so you'd have a hanging surface. Walls go up, walls come down."



Ms. Ross, left, and Bastienne Schmidt, a resident who curated the “A Sense of Place” exhibition at the Southampton Arts Center, worked on one of Ms. Ross’s pieces for the show on Tuesday. Credit Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times

Ms. Ross, thwarted in her plan for a window in the wall, had another idea. She stenciled an attention-grabbing message in big green letters: “DO NOT LOOK BEHIND THIS WALL.” She installed an eight-foot mirror on the back of the wall, the better to see the altar. She also set up a rack with copies of her original proposal, marked, in large letters, “DENIED.”

It was a last-minute improvisation, one that Bastienne Schmidt, a resident who curated the exhibition, said dovetailed with the exhibition’s title, “*A Sense of Place*.” She also said that turning down Ms. Ross had reflected “a philosophy of doing things that’s not very flexible.”

Amy Kirwin, the director of programs at the arts center, said, “It was a new situation to approach.”

“I love what she came up with,” Ms. Kirwin said of Ms. Ross. “With the mirror, it’s even more intriguing. I love the mirror. I told her I’d like to keep it.”