

# Finding artists amid the farms and fields

## Studio tour aids creative network in a rural county

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Contributing writer

When Serena Kovalosky left Whitehall, N.Y., in the late 1970s, she says she was searching for “a culture community” that didn’t exist in rural Washington County.

At the time, becoming an artist wasn’t part of her plan. Neither was returning to Whitehall.

But five years ago, she left behind a “fabulous” studio in Montreal and a stimulating network of artistic friends and came back to her roots. As gentrification priced her out of her formerly bohemian neighborhood in Montreal, she had considered relocating to the Canadian countryside. But she kept finding herself drawn home by the sensory memories imprinted in childhood.

“I knew the dirt here,” she said. “I knew all the trees and how the outdoors has a particular smell.”

One thing she didn’t know was whether she would find a community of other artists. So she was pleasantly surprised to discover that in the past 30 years, many fine artists have taken up residence in Washington County, especially in the southern part of the county.

Two years ago, Kovalosky helped to organize the county’s first self-guided tour of local artists’ studios. The event was inspired by her conversations with ceramic artist Brenda McMahon about the annual Tour des Arts in



When Serena Kovalosky moved back to Washington County, N.Y., five years ago from Montreal,

the Eastern Townships of Quebec.

Organizing and promoting the event came naturally to Kovalosky, who had worked for 18 years in the tourism industry in Montreal. McMahon brought skills from her prior career in broadcasting.

The tour got an enthusiastic response from collectors, art lovers and the participating artists, so this year Kovalosky is directing the second Open Studios of Washington County tour, to be held on the weekend of July 18-19. A diverse group of 12 professional artists will host the free, self-guided tour.

### Productive space

Like other artists participating in the tour, Kovalosky said she sees the county's rural landscape and slower-paced lifestyle as a boon to creativity.

she was surprised to discover how many fine artists now call the rural county home. Kovalosky will be displaying her work as part of an Open Studios Tour in the county July 18-19.

Using heirloom quality gourds as the substrate, Kovalosky creates powerful organic sculptural forms and vessels, which she further hones with detailed carving, pyro-engraving and gold alloy gilding.

It took her awhile to find her niche as an artist. As she tells it, one morning she woke up and quit her day job in Montreal. She moved into a loft in an old mill occupied by 300 artists and began exploring different media.

"I went from pinstripe suit to blue jeans," she said. "The artists didn't care how I was dressed. I'd go into this one's studio and play with clay and into that one's space and paint."

Kovalosky describes living hand to mouth, putting pieces in every show she could. Her \$300-a-month studio was also her home. Ultimately, condo conversion drove out the artists who had colonized what had been a bad part of town. Her rent tripled in three years; that's when she moved south.

In the five years since she came home to Whitehall, Kovalosky said, she has been much more prolific than in the preceding 15 years in Montreal.

"I can work outside here," she said. "I hear

birds singing and smell the lilacs. I've got a mountain in my backyard and all the farmland with the cows."



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