Artists' Alliance finds new downtown home

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LAFAYETTE — Sanctuary may be found at the Artists' Alliance. Refuge and recharging of the muse is also available.

Until Saturday, visitors to the gallery's new home at 551 Jefferson St. viewed works of the Alliance's own members in its annual Members' Exhibition. Visitors, said board of directors President Gwen Hutsler, also bought some of the work from the 53 members represented in the show.

"We do a little bit of just about everything that's contemporary art," said Hutsler, who has been active with the alliance for the past 10 years.

Contemporary art, Hutsler explains, is the work of living artists. The 13-year-old Artists' Alliance features visual artists (painters and photographers, for example); 3-D artists (sculptors, jewelry); dancers (classical ballet to modern free-form); and writers (poets to songwriters).

In fact, Hutsler said, 102 of the 116 dues-paying members are artists. Another $18 supports "can be counted on for donations," she said.

The Alliance operates on an annual budget of about $35,000 that comes from donations, memberships and grants.

As with many arts organizations, funding and what it buys is sometimes sporadic.

"This year turned out to be almost the year of hell," Hutsler said, "but it has also been one of the best.

For most of its existence, since 1986, The Alliance called the spacious old Lafayette Hardware building home, trading ongoing renovation and repair for lease payment. But the owners decided it was time to see if they could generate some actual income from the 120-year-old building.

When the air-conditioning system at the old location broke down last spring and the Alliance could not afford to replace it, "the owners asked us to leave," Hutsler said.

"We seriously looked at closing," she continued, "but then something really strange, for Lafayette, happened. "We started hearing from the public and the media, and they were saying, 'You can't close this.'"

Lawyer Bob Wright has donated the cost of a two-year lease on the Alliance's new building, which was offered to the Alliance at a reduced rate from building owner, retired City Court Judge Kaliste Saloom Jr. The gallery opened in September, and the members' exhibit began Nov. 14.

The two-story, 8,000-square-foot structure became the focus of donations that Hutsler admits still astound her.

One member donated thousands of dollars worth of carpeting for the gallery. A real estate company gave furniture for one of the office suites.

A security company is monitoring the gallery for half its usual price.

Internationally known muralist Robert Dafford donated the work of his crew to refurbish the building's "pseudo-New Orleans look," and the workers uncovered the original glass-brick wall, covered by French Quarter-styled shutters, and steam-cleaned the brick, leaving an "art deco, Miami look." The work was completed in November.

"The openings of each new show are great," he said. "We (artists) get to hang out with each other. Most of us have been working in the area 20 years or more, and this has helped forge friendships through our work."

Jean Edwards, University of Southwestern Louisiana interior design teacher and Alliance board member, displayed drawings at the Alliance exhibit.

"We're right in the middle of downtown, where everything is happening," Edwards said of the gallery's location. "I feel very excited about the community support we found while looking for a new home."

Edwards, like Dafford, finds the most valuable aspect of The Artists' Alliance is the chance to connect with other local artists. She said she also tries to attend all the performing arts events.

Hutsler said the Alliance occasionally offers author readings and dance performances, which are free unless they are not funded by a grant. Admission to the gallery is free, though visitors are urged to leave a donation.

Most of the time, visitors can view works of artists from outside Louisiana and even international artists, which Hutsler said is part of the Alliance's mission.

"We want to touch as many people as possible," she said.

Memberships are available to anyone and range in price from $10 per year for art students to $1,000 — or more — for truly generous art lovers.

"We'll take anything; we're not proud," Hutsler said.

The Artists' Alliance will reopen Jan. 9. Normal hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, and 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturdays. The gallery is closed Sundays and Mondays.

For information on group tours or memberships, call (318) 233-7518.