

ART GALLERY GUIDE

Winter population drop can be hard for local art galleries

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Despite what some tourists may think, there is life after summer in northwestern Lower Michigan. Long after the Cherry Festival wraps up and the beaches are deserted, it is business as usual for many year-round residents.

But the absence of the summer crowd inevitably affects small businesses, including local art galleries. Many of them feel the sting of diminished revenue as the long winter takes the place of the pleasant (and prosperous) summer.

"It just costs too much to stay open," said Marion Devinney, co-owner of Synchronicity Gallery in Glen Arbor, which will be closing for the winter Oct. 31.

She added that the population drop in the winter makes it difficult to break even, let alone actually make money, considering the cost of utilities and advertising.

Some gallery owners have different motives for locking up for the winter. Pier Wright, who opened the Wright Gallery in Northport this summer, said he closes in the fall so he can focus on his art.

An abstract painter with a studio on Old Mission, Wright said the lull of the winter months will help him concentrate on his own work, which he will then sell at one of his gallery's monthly openings next summer.

Wright said that this sea-

sonal cycle works out perfectly because his summer schedule does not leave enough time for painting.

"The gallery business has proven to be much more time consuming than I thought," he said.

However, Wright admitted that his gallery's location in Northport plays a large part in his decision to close in the winter.

"If the gallery were located in downtown Traverse City, it would probably be a different story," he said.

Cherrie Stege of Lake Street Studios' Forest Gallery in Glen Arbor agreed that location is key:

"There aren't enough people in Glen Arbor to warrant staying open in winter, but in Glen Arbor, people expect (seasonal business), so it doesn't hurt us to close," said Stege.

The Forest Gallery shuts its doors each winter so its stable of artists, Stege and several members of her family can concentrate on producing enough work for the busy summer season.

Stege and her father are metalsmiths, but the other members of her family work in various media including watercolor, pastel and pottery.

Although the Forest Gallery is technically closed for the entire winter, Stege said they occasionally open during the holiday season, since many items at the gallery make good gifts.

But the freedom to open

and close based on demand is not one enjoyed by all gallery owners.

"It's a wonderful situation when an artist runs a gallery by himself — when he can call the shots," said Terri Freudenberger, owner of the Coyote Woman Gallery in Harbor Springs.

Freudenberger keeps her gallery open year-round, partly because the frame shop attached to the gallery attracts steady business from permanent residents and does not rely as heavily on the summer crowd.

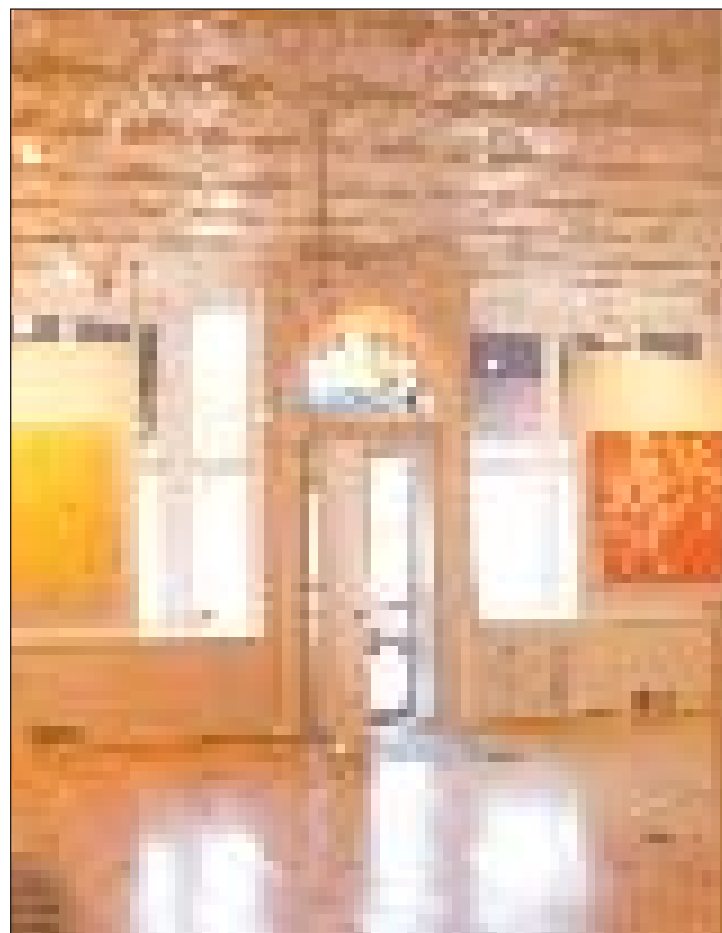
But the main reason Freudenberger chooses to keep her gallery open is for the sake of her employees. Braving the winter is the price of "having a turnover rate of zero" and retaining her trusted regular employees, she said.

Ray Algueseva, who co-manages the River Street Gallery in Manistee, said the key to surviving the "dead season" is rolling with the punches, or as Algueseva said, "focusing on a different customer group."

Once the summer people leave, "Manistee is essentially a blue collar town — people can't always afford to spend \$2,000 on an original piece of art, but they might be able to spend two or three hundred."

Some of the River Street Gallery's fall openings also cater to different seasonal needs. Algueseva said both the gallery's

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Top, the Wright Gallery in Northport. Bottom, an untitled piece by Helaine Milliman that will appear in the Wright Gallery's final opening of the season on Sept. 5.