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Nomadic show stagers: the Ground Floor's Levesque (left) and Robinette.

Cutting-Edge Curators

The breadth of Louisville's visual-arts scene has widened considerably since the young impresarios of Ground Floor Gallery started showing their stuff.

BY JOSH MOSS

Jesse Levesque slept on a leather couch last night in this unoccupied building on West Main Street's 1000 block. It seemed like the most practical thing to do. After all, she and the other Ground Floor Gallery members — a local group Levesque, 36, and Sara Robinette, 31, co-founded that's flipping the standard art-show concept on its head — were setting up their latest event, titled "Nine," past 11 p.m., and they needed to wake up early to finish the job on this chilly late-March Saturday, the day of the show. "It was wishful thinking that we'd get it done earlier," Levesque says. "There are always bumps in the road."

Their goal had been to curate a week before, but only a few of the nine artists the self-funded Ground Floor would be featuring (all but one from Louisville) had completed their original work by that deadline. So setting up a day in advance would have to do. "A lot of these ideas are big ideas," Robinette says. "But it all pulls together in the end."

Once the exhibition begins at 6 p.m. and people begin filing in to see "Nine" at the three-story venue — "It's a building to lust after," Robinette says — nobody realizes the space was basically bare 24 hours before. And why would they? On the street level, in a 1,500-square-foot room, a woman tends bar, pouring free glasses of wine and bourbon cocktails. Nearby, a man blares tunes from speakers hooked up to his laptop while one of two bands that will play live music sets up its equipment. The overhead fluorescent bulbs are off, and the colorful DJ lights swirl.

Upstairs is where the artwork is on display. The building's owner, Bill Marzian, says the structure went up in the late 1880s as a tobacco warehouse. On the second story, the original wood floor — which, as far as Marzian can tell, is an oak or a pine — is still in place and starts to vibrate when the band begins playing down below. A mesmerizing, \$4,000 enamel-on-aluminum painting hangs on one of the red-brick walls. The piece's vi-

brant bands meet at a point in the middle and prompt one arrgoer to ask her granddaughter, "Can you think of another color that isn't on there?" There are also a series of photo prints, a projector showing an artist's DVD titled *The Nightmare* and two sculptures: a massive ladder constructed out of natural and man-made materials and an oversized rosewood bowling pin with a flaccid head standing next to a black bowling ball made out of concrete.

One of the nine artists showing new work is Colin Miller, a photographer who also created pieces for former Ground Floor shows. "I let them do the hard work," he says, referring to how he allows Levesque and Robinette to price his art and hang it where they deem fit. "I just present my stuff and say, 'Here you go.'" And with only nine artists — compared with, say, more than 60 at one past show — it's a more manageable size, a way to ensure quality work and prevent rushed pieces from squeezing in at the last minute. "For this show," Miller says, "they definitely weeded a lot of that out."

A three-flight staircase climbs to the top floor, where there are two bedrooms and a kitchen. The crowd, a mixture of tattooed hipsters and married couples and grandparents with their grandchildren, munches on the complimentary assortment of breads and vegetable wraps and brownies. One of the rooms has a checkerboard ceiling with squares that are two tones of brown. Two 30-by-7-foot murals, one titled *Tropical Spree*, the other titled *American Arboretum*, stretch the length of two of the walls. On another wall are two versions of collaged biblical text. Small glass pillows rest on podiums, which illuminate the sculptures from underneath.

In the next room, people plop on a leopard-print beanbag or on a black leather couch — the same one Levesque crashed on last night — and watch a video titled *Silent Partner*, from the same woman who made *The Nightmare*. Also on display is a series from Miller, who, without revealing his tricks, threw paint on naked subjects and then manipulated the images on his computer to make the people sort of look like they are vanishing.

Levesque, Robinette and Lindsey Dobson, who is showing photographs and volunteered to help book the bands, wear dresses. Levesque is in a black wig that, some say, is Cleopatra-esque. They all present relaxed demeanors. This is an upgrade from some previous events. It's worth noting that before one of Ground Floor's past shows, the women didn't even have time to eat supper...or shower.

Though "Nine" has fewer artists and is a bit less, as Robinette puts it, "circus-y" than Ground Floor's previous, element-inspired shows — "Inhale," "Saturate," "Ignite" and "Dig" — the purpose is basically the same. "We want to exhibit artists that you don't see in the art galleries here," Robinette says. "Every time you go to a Gallery

Hop...it's the exact same crowd that's there. And we knew there were a lot more capable artists in this town. We just wanted to change it up a little bit and kind of branch out and showcase some of the a little bit more undiscovered artists."

There's that and — especially at the homey, West Main Street setting for "Nine" — also proving to people that living with original artwork is, depending on their income, a viable alternative to knickknacks from Target or Bed Bath & Beyond. The Saturday before "Nine," for example, Levesque and Robinette priced copies of *The Nightmare* at \$50 and the glass pillows at \$500 apiece. They valued the bowling pin and ball at \$15,000. By showtime, they had displayed everything in a way that somebody could mimic in his or her own home. "We want to show that you can live with original artwork," Robinette says. "We all appreciate original art. It makes everybody feel good. But there's a disconnect between the people who want to buy art and have the money to buy art and the people who make art. So we're trying to make that connection."

Adds Levesque: "It's not a revolutionary idea. People used to live with original art all the time. People had frescoes on the walls in their homes. We've just gotten so far away from that and into plastic crap."

Several years ago, Robinette and Levesque, both Lexington natives, met at a pottery sale in Southern Indiana. They were both making art at the time — Robinette in photography, Levesque in sculpture — and wanted to unite artists in Louisville, wanted to create a community vibe that Robinette missed from her days as a student at Transylvania University, a liberal-arts college in Lexington. "The artists here (in Louisville) seem very isolated. Their spaces are very far away from each other," says Levesque, who at the time was studying at the University of Louisville to get her master's in sculpture — a career path she'd change to curatorial studies once Ground Floor took off.

By the time the two friends became roommates in Louisville, their solution was to create events that they would like to attend. The recipe called for a mixture of a variety of styles, from paintings and photographs to installation pieces, performance artists and musicians. They wanted it all. And they wanted to do big, one-time blowouts. "If you don't show up to the opening night of a show, you don't quite understand what's gone into it," Robinette says. "If you go, say, the day after — because sometimes we're open the Sunday after a show — well, the music's not there and the performance art's not there and there's a lot of that live activity that's not there. It's definitely more calm and it's just a visual art show from there."

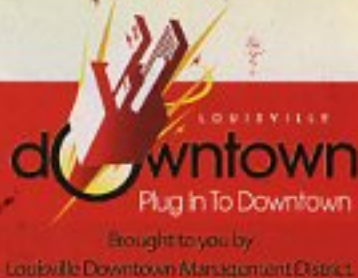
Eventually Levesque's younger sister, Amanda Bishop, came to visit from San Francisco with her roommate, Teresa Huarte. Over wine,

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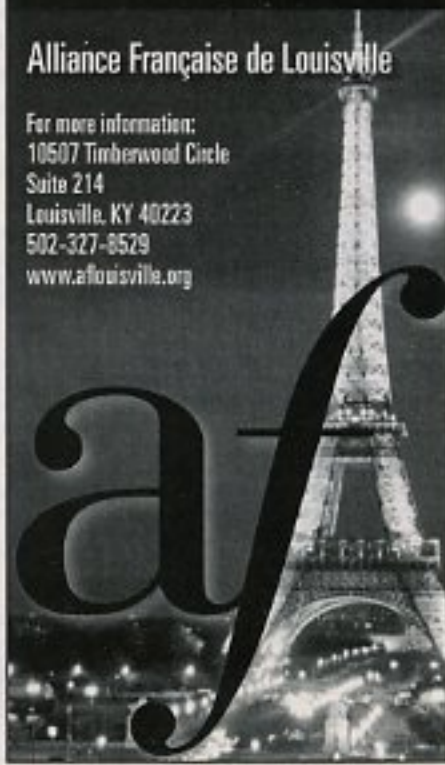


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the foursome discussed the idea, which, from the beginning, Levesque wanted to call Ground Floor because she "was feeling like, as an artist, you really do have to start on the ground floor and work your way up." Bishop and Huarte expressed interest and six months later moved to Louisville. "They weren't joking," Levesque says. Her mother, Cynda, also helped out and became, as Levesque puts it, a "behind-the-scenes dynamo" who just might show up to a curating session with a smorgasbord from Shiraz Mediterranean Grill and a cooler filled with soda and bottles of Newcastle ale. By 2005 Ground Floor had been born and was a way for the women involved to curate other artists and, if they wanted to, show their own work. "From the very beginning, Louisville just has really gotten behind us and what we're doing," Levesque says.

"By not having a permanent space, that's always a challenge," Robinette says. "We show up and the spaces are not galleries. We say, 'How can we convert this?'"

And the interesting thing about that is, Ground Floor, which survives on the generosity of volunteers, has never seriously considered — and doesn't really plan on — settling into its own building. Sometimes they get access to the event spaces months in advance. Other times, it's not until the night before. Often, they make improvements to the locations, employing volunteer carpenters, painters, electricians, plumbers and other "fix-it" types to produce show-ready places. "By not having a permanent space, that's always a challenge," Robinette says. "We show up and the spaces are *not* galleries. We say, 'How can we convert this?'"

The first show, "Inhale," was in April 2006 at the Riverbend Winery, on South 10th Street, and featured nearly 30 artists. A group from Actors Theatre came dressed as airline stewardesses and performed impromptu routines of pre-flight instructions. Four months later, in August, came "Saturate," which took place at the St. Francis Building on West Broadway and showcased more than 60 artists. For that one, the ladies of Ground Floor painted the, uh, ground floor to look like a swimming pool and showed up in 1940s-style bathing suits and high heels. One guy came in a shark costume. Some women dressed as mermaids.

In January 2007, they doused picture frames, books, a television and a sofa with gasoline and set them ablaze for their next show, titled "Ignite," at Glassworks on West Market Street. "It was surprising how slow the couch

cushions burned," Robinette says. For "Dig" last June, they featured more than 40 artists at a West Main Street location different from the one used for "Nine." Robinette sported a dress she made out of green leaves. "I kept telling her, 'That's going to be quite a show if that falls off of you,'" Levesque says.

Michael Linzy, who showed work at "Inhale," decided to create the glass pillows for "Nine." "The exposure is really good," he says. "They have a little more outreach to the rest of the community outside the typical art community." Clare Hirn, who displayed pieces at "Saturate" and "Ignite," made the 30-by-7-foot murals shown at "Nine." "I really love their energy," Hirn says of the women in Ground Floor. "It's a mix of good business sense and art appreciation." Though some of the artists featured in Ground Floor events have their own galleries — or have been featured in local galleries — the extravagant parties offer a chance to show their work in an unconventional environment.

For all the shows preceding "Nine," hundreds showed up and paid the \$5 or \$10 cover charge to see work by artists from all over the United States, including cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Asheville, N.C., and, of course, Louisville. After "Dig," though, Ground Floor entered a transition period. Huarte moved to Portland with her boyfriend, and Levesque's sister planned on heading to Seattle.

Levesque and Robinette contemplated their next step, though they were not prepared to disband altogether. Then Marzian contacted them about his building. "We had a lot of the same ideas about how important art is to the community and downtown," says Marzian, president of the East Downtown Business Association. Levesque and Robinette simply couldn't turn down the offer. "We said, 'Let's do one, but let's scale it way back,'" Robinette says. And they refused to hold it on the same night as the Trolley Hop, which Marzian had recommended. "We do that on purpose," Levesque says. "We want it to be its own separate event."

The challenge in the coming months for Levesque and Robinette, who both have jobs outside Ground Floor, is learning how to generate revenue. At "Nine," they chose not to implement a cover charge for the first time, though one man told Levesque he would have paid \$50 for admission. They do collect 30 percent from all artwork sales, but Levesque has bigger financial plans. For one, she wants to find a way to profit from the building owners, who have been able to lease their spaces because of the visibility that a Ground Floor show creates. She's also interested in attracting investors and tapping into corporations' art budgets. "My goal is to have 20 artists who have regular series of work, and we can

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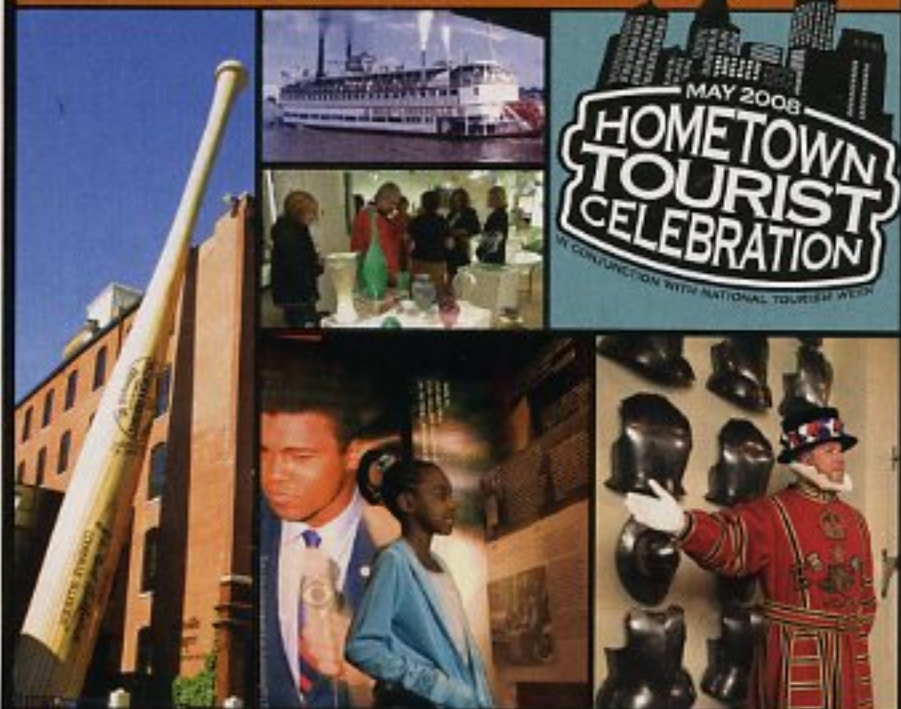
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represent that work," she says. "Then I just go into places — banks, law firms, wherever — and I help them figure out how to transition into having original art, by younger artists from right around here, and we take down all of the motivational posters."



A piece from the Ground Floor's late-March "Nine" show.

For the record, she and Robinette are not interested in ditching the spectacular bashes altogether. They still like doing them. But maybe in the future, Levesque says, they might scale back to one massive affair a year instead of two, turn it into a fund-raiser with a "gourmet vegetarian" dinner. There has even been talk of transporting the shows to other cities. "Nine" is building toward something else that's going to happen over the next six to eight months, but Sara won't let me talk about it," Levesque says. "We're very secretive," Robinette adds. "It creates that buzz. It really does."

As the clock approaches 10 p.m., still an hour before "Nine" ends, the crowd is as thick as it has been all night. Levesque has only sold one of Linzy's \$500 glass pillows and hopes that tomorrow — when they open for four hours — collectors who missed the show will express interest in several of the pieces. "Selling art still has that stigma," Robinette says. "The fact that we sold anything is exciting."

Down on the first level, the band is well into its set. Folks take in the different media: the videos and the sculptures, the paintings and the photographs. The local artists stand by their work, explaining their creative processes. Physically, the event might be smaller than what the Ground Floor has done before, but the ideas are just as big as they've always been. The key is establishing, Levesque says, a profitable "business model." "If they can figure out the business aspect," Marzian says, "they'll be hard to stop." Staff writer Josh Moss may be reached at jmoss@loumag.com.