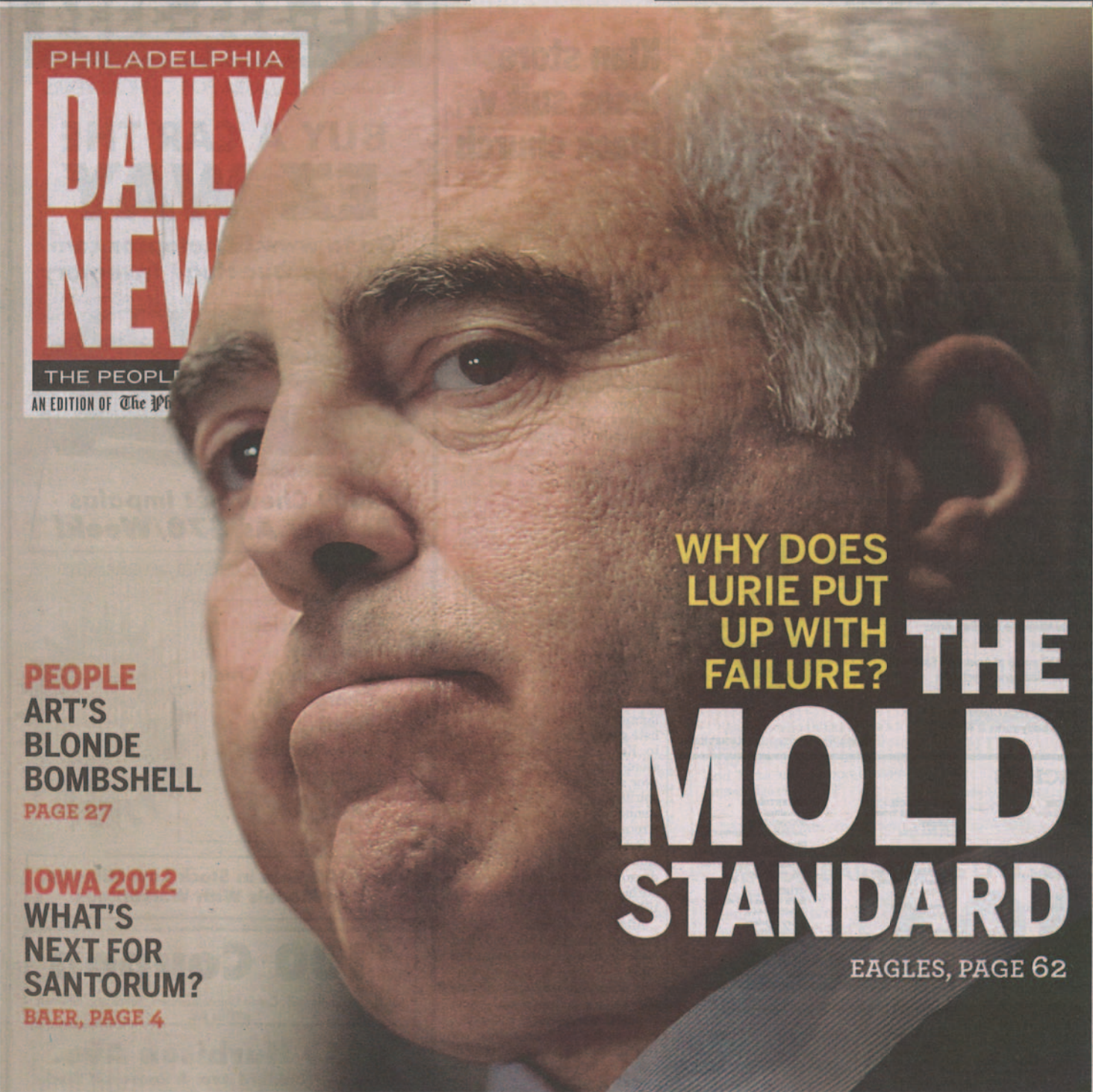
Wednesday, January 4, 2012 APPS | BLOG | COMMENT philly.com CHAT | SOCIAL | VIDEO $1.25 in some locations outside the metropolitan area PHILADELPHIA MEDIA NETWORK $1

PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS
THE PEOPL
AN EDITION OF The P



WHY DOES LURIE PUT UP WITH FAILURE?

THE MOLD STANDARD

EAGLES, PAGE 62

PEOPLE
ART'S BLONDE BOMBSHELL
PAGE 27

IOWA 2012
WHAT'S NEXT FOR SANTORUM?
BAER, PAGE 4

GIZMO GUY: Resolve to use these apps and gadgets in the new year. **Page 31**

FEATURES

GOSSIP: Damon Feldman's latest production? A pillow fight. **Page 29**

Bridgette Mayer (above) established the Bridgette Mayer Gallery in 2001. After a decade, it's been enlarged. ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

BLONDE AMBITION

BY MOLLY EICHEL

eichelm@phillynews.com
215-854-5909

Bridgette Mayer makes her mark in abstract art

AMONG the paintings in the recent "Karmic Abstraction" show at Bridgette Mayer Gallery was a large piece by Ryan McGinness. An art-world star — the *New York Times* says so — his work hangs in respected institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and Spain's MUSAC.

He's kind of a big deal.

McGinness had other works in the show, but let's focus on one: "Untitled (Black Hole, Black 72.1)." On a black background, neon squiggles race in and out of each other as if created by some cosmic Spirograph.

"Oh, and there's a black light, too!" Bridgette Mayer, the gallery's owner and namesake, said as she crouched, in high heels, behind a wall to dim the overhead lights.

What had seemed an arresting piece of abstract art immediately came alive in the black light's glow. The painting seemed to exist in wholly different planes, as if you could walk right into it with only the anticipation of what might be on the other side to keep you going.

See **MAYER** *Page 30*

Bridgette Mayer at her gallery in November with the Phillies' hobbled first-baseman Ryan Howard (right) and her boyfriend, Dennis Alter (left). JIM GRAHAM / FOR THE DAILY NEWS

MAYER

Continued from Page 27

This painting — 6 feet in diameter — wouldn't have fit in the Bridgette Mayer Gallery a scant year ago, before the gallery closed for a 10-month transformation. Major renovations knocked down barriers, taking out the one-bedroom apartment that awkwardly cut into the gallery's space. Mayer had opened her gallery at this location 10 years ago, then bought the Washington Square building five years later when she was 31. The recent renovatioh was a very expensive, time-consuming 10th-anniversary present to herself.

"It's an investment in the [Philadelphia] art scene in a way," Libby Rosof, co-founder of the locally based Art Blog, said of the gallery, which reopened in November. "It's an investment in the city."

Some might say that merely surviving a decade dealing abstract art in Philadelphia, selling pieces from $1,000 to $100,000, forever in the shadow of art capital New York, was success enough. Not for Mayer. She wants her gallery to be part of the international art conversation. She wants other galleries here to be must-stops for artists like McGinness. And she wants Philadelphians — us — to respond to this art. To appreciate it. Understand it. Welcome it. And buy it.

Dig deeper, and Mayer reveals details of her past that hint at why she's so driven: She was born into poverty in Jersey City, N.J., to an alcoholic mother who would sometimes leave Mayer and her two sisters alone for days with little to eat. The girls were in and out of foster homes but eventually adopted by a family that had only sons and wanted some daughters.

Mayer is far away from the foster system now.

The renovated gallery is light and airy. The space flows well, pulling you farther in to see more of the work. Downstairs, Mayer exuberantly showed off her storage area (you know a gallery owner loves her job when she gets this excited about closets), a wine cellar where uniform bottles line a brick archway, a conference room and Mayer's office.

"Recognition," oil on canvas by Charles Burwell. Mayer says she strives to promote her artists in and beyond Philadelphia.

When she started, Mayer didn't have an office.

She would sit upstairs, acting as her own receptionist. Now she has her own space with a sliding glass door, decorated in that minimalist way that screams modernity. A landscape photograph by the Philadelphia-based artist Eileen Neff hangs behind her desk. Small, Magritte-inspired sculptures line a book shelf.

Mayer doesn't have much time to make art anymore, but she's still creating. The gallery, as she sees it, is her masterpiece.

"I'm consumed by my business," Mayer said. "I don't find that I need to make art. My creativity comes when I curate the shows, working with an artist for two years to create their exhibition. I'm really fulfilled creatively by those challenges."

A drive to suceed

Art has always been Mayer's outlet.

Acrylic on canvas by Nathan Pankratz, from show at Mayer.

When she was 5 and still living in Jersey City, Mayer was looking for something to play with and found her mother's makeup bag. "I remember making this giant painting on the wall with all of her lipsticks and her eyeshadows," Mayer said. "I got in big trouble; I got beat up for doing that."

When she's talking about her early childhood, Mayer's speech markedly slows and she chooses her words carefully. Mayer doesn't speak to her biological family anymore. Her mother passed away a couple of years ago from lung cancer.

When she was 7, Mayer and her two sisters went to live with what she considers her true family in the New Jersey "farm country" of Hunterdon County. She lived with them for several years, then was sent back to her biological mother. Eventually, she was adopted into their stable household. "I had this amazing childhood with them," Mayer said.

Still, the burden of her childhood was difficult to shake off. As a 7-year-old, she couldn't read. Living with her new family, she had to learn "the basic things that children learn when they grow up with parents," Mayer said. "There was a long period in my life where I felt like I was behind, and I always had to catch up with other people in my age group. So I think that created in me this drive to keep up and to excel, this drive to exist."

Mayer may have learned to survive because of her rough upbringing, but it was the arts that focused her.

"When I was having a hard time at school or having a hard time emotionally or going through something in my life, it would take care of me emotionally. I could express something with a painting or drawing that I couldn't express in words at that

See **MAYER** *Page 32*

Mayer says she wants Philly galleries to be must-stops for artists like McGinness (artwork at right). ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

MAYER
Continued from Page 30

time in my life," Mayer said.

Mayer is an artist, a painter — she minored in studio art while an art-history major at Bucknell University. But after college, working in New York galleries, she found she preferred the administrative side of the arts. She moved to Philadelphia in 1999.

"I could not find a job working in a gallery that was showing the type of art I wanted to sell. As a direct response to that, I started looking at the market, meeting artists and finding the work I was really interested in. I spent a lot of time in the graduate-school programs, getting to know the work," Mayer said.

She became an art consultant, but when she sold two pieces in a short time — one a major commission to the Capital Grille, the other to a cab driver — she had an epiphany: She had the skills, why not take the next step? Mayer opened her gallery in 2001 when she was 27.

Mayer said it was important that her gallery opened without a financial backer. "I didn't want to be tied down to representing something that wasn't my authentic vision," Mayer said. She also didn't want to carry a debt load in her beginning years. She had seen too many gallery owners in New York take on so much debt they couldn't pay their artists. That's not how she wanted to operate.

Instead, Mayer just worked all the time in the early years. She was always available to clients, a philosophy she still follows.

Barbara Harberger, director of arts and collections at Marguerite Rodgers interior design, has worked with Mayer for about seven years. "I can get a thought one night at 6 or 7 and we'll be texting back and forth. If she can't be there [at her gallery], she'll have someone else there to meet me at these very strange times," said Harberger.

Always hungry

Asked for their thoughts on Mayer, some involved in the local art world who didn't want to be named mentioned that her romantic relationship with Dennis Alter, the uber-rich former CEO of Advanta, may open doors. Case in point: She curated the Alter Hall Art Collection at Temple University's Fox School of Business. Alter and his then-wife Gisela contributed $15 million toward the construction of the building that bears his name.

But so what, said others. It's not like Mayer hasn't worked hard.

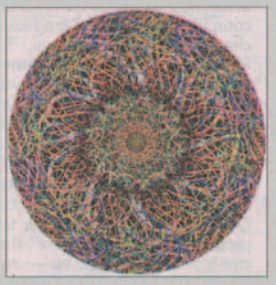
"Any time you have a connection with that position and notoriety it's going to open you up" to criticism, said Louella G. Tripp, whose L.G. Tripp Gallery also deals in abstract art. "That's only natural, and that's OK. But obviously it's going to help."

Mayer declined to comment on Alter. "I really don't talk about my personal life and personal relationships because it's not part of my work life," she said.

Mayer is known for pushing her artists and her gallery outside of Philadelphia. She goes to the major art fairs such as Art Miami and Art Palm Beach. She recently started attending Art Dallas to bring her artists into the Texas market. Rebecca Rutstein, one of the artists Mayer represents, noted that Mayer's marketing efforts have afforded Rutstein a solo show in California and a spot in a group show in New York.

Mayer also works in the secondary art market, reselling collectors' works to expand her own brand. And she wants her gallery to become a destination for internationally known artists. At the end of January, Costa Rican artist Federico Herrero, who has never had a major exhibit in the U.S., will paint murals in Mayer's gallery, mounting an exhibit in the first part of February. "I want to be an ambassador bringing things into the city that haven't happened before," Mayer said. "So that's a part of my challenge: getting people to appreciate it, be excited about it and want to support it through buying something, or telling someone who will come in to see it."

Philadelphia's art scene differs from many other cities' in that galleries aren't necessarily king. "In New York it's the commercial galleries that dominate, but in Philadelphia it's the [artist-run] collectives that dominate," Rosof said.



Ryan McGinness' "Untitled (Black Hole, Black 72.1)" is 6 feet in diameter.

Perhaps because of this, many gallery owners around the city agreed that the Philly scene isn't as competitive as New York's. "We all have very different areas of focus. I don't feel any competition," said Amy Adams, director of the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery. "We all work together in a really cooperative way. It has its moments, but it's a great place to work and make art."

Rosof said Mayer gravitates toward abstract expressionism (think Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko) filled with color, though she sometimes deals in more representational works. This separates her from Philly's two other prominent abstract galleries — L.G. Tripp Gallery and Larry Becker Contemporary Art.

"A clear vision helps any gallery. That helps you build collectors," Rosof said. "It's a strength, but [Mayer's] not totally locked into consistency."

Dance of the collector

To Mayer, abstract art is just another challenge. "It's not as immediate art as realisitic or figurative art," Mayer said. "As a collector's taste develops, they'll start with prints and go to realist, then figurative painting. Then they'll go to abstract. I wanted to take on that challenge. I wanted the gallery to showcase work I would collect myself."

She's been attracted to abstract art since she was a student at Bucknell, where she worked in the Center Gallery (now the Samek Art Gallery), ran long-distance and worked in the theater publicity department.

"She has a specific kind of eye," said Bill Valerio, director of the Woodmere Art Museum in Chestnut Hill, which focuses on collecting Philadelphia artists. "A gallery develops a repertoire of collectors and visitors who dance around that pole, and a gallery's job is to expand the people doing the dance, so to speak."

Mayer is particularly adept at getting people to dance.

"She's very good at helping her artists and making money for them. She is working for them. She's been able to keep a lot of them happy," said Rachel Zimmerman, executive director of In-Liquid, a nonprofit that seeks to provide exposure for Philadelphia artists. "My hope is that her expansion and what she's doing works for the whole community of Philadelphia."

Despite the dismal economy, Mayer said her collecter base is growing. "I've always done well, and I've always grown, and I think part of that is my commitment to business. It's not a hobby for me; I don't do it for fun."

"I feel a great responsibility to my artists to keep helping them achieve what they want to achieve in the art world. I think maybe there's a seriousness that comes with all that that helps me be successful. ... I'm always pushing. I guess I'm always hungry to keep making an impact." ■