

# Philly artists open their doors

## Annual two-weekend event features studios from South Philly to Kensington

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**F**LAMES SPEWED from the steel crucible as Germantown artists Gina Michaels and her husband John Phillips tossed in chunks of scrapped bronze. They attentively watched the molten metal through welding shields, occasionally stirring it like a witch's cauldron. After 45 minutes of preparation, the liquid reached 2,000 degrees and was ready to pour.

Michaels and Phillips are two bronze sculptors participating in the 8th annual Philadelphia Open Studio Tours, a two-weekend event that offers artists the opportunity to open their studios to the public, according to POST Director Andrew Pirie.

This year, 287 professional painters, sculptors, photographers, printmakers, ceramic artists, furniture makers and installation artists will welcome Philadelphians and tourists alike into their personal work spaces for the event.

Artists pay \$80 to participate and visitors have the option of just observing the artwork, or purchasing pieces. This weekend the tour will showcase studios east of Broad Street — Old City, South Philly, Northern Liberties, Kensington, Fishtown and Port Richmond. Next weekend studios west of Broad Street — West Philly, Germantown, Mount Airy, Roxborough and East Falls — will take their turn. All studios will be open from noon to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Karen Brown, a Fishtown artist who specializes in high-tech contemporary sculpture, created POST eight years ago simply because she wanted to sell her work. She knew that if only she opened her studio to the public, it wouldn't draw much of a crowd, so she invited a few of her artist friends to join her. The first POST consisted of only 13 artists, according to Brown.

"I modeled it after an open studio tour they do in San Francisco," where 700 to 800 artists participate, said Brown.

With the help of the Philadel-



Photos: JESSICA GRIFFIN/Daily News

phia Office of Arts and Culture, the next year Brown recruited 150 artists. Until 2005 the event was organized by volunteers, but during the three years that Brown ran it, POST was more like a full-time job for her.

"It was an enormous amount of work," Brown said. "I actually went into debt doing it. It's hard getting things off the ground, but [the current organizers] are doing a great job getting the word out."

Pirie took over as POST's director last year, having served on the planning committee previously. Although the job is part time, his work begins as soon as this year's event ends, starting by getting feedback from the artists. In the spring he begins recruiting volunteers and artists and throughout the year he raises funds and

seeks sponsors.

Although he draws as a hobby, Pirie doesn't compare himself to the artists you'll see during the open studio tours. "They're all trying to make it."

Michaels, who moved here from New York City in 1990, said she participates in this event because it gives people a chance to see her work who normally wouldn't. Philly, she said, is a good place to be a working artist.

"It's a big enough city that you can get anything you need, but small enough that it doesn't take three hours to do it," Michaels said. "The Philadelphia art community is solid and less trendy

than New York."

Artists **John Phillips** (left) and his wife **Gina Michaels** at their studio/foundry in Germantown.

than New York."

On Tuesday Michaels and her husband did a bronze pour for a sculpture of a six-foot flower. Phillips maneuvered the steel shank with pick-up tongs, carefully guiding the apparatus to a mold of clay and sand. Michaels ladled the lavalike liquid into the mold. In one hour, it would be a stem. The piece will take her a couple of months to complete, but it's not the only thing she's working on.

"You're always doing a million things when you're an artist," she said. "I'm the design department, the promotions department and production department. The idea that artists are just out in their studios all the time making art is not the case. I always tell people



that if they can be something else, do it."

Michaels said that managing business and art is both a challenge for successful and struggling artists. Those who aren't successful must spend their time making money in other ways.

Mark Rounds, a Northern Liberties artist who builds things like model ships and Christmas trees from recycled materials, works full time in construction,

while pursuing his art in his down time.

He often goes into his Port Richmond studio several hours before he has to be at his construction job, and comes back when his shift ends.

"I wish I could do it full time, but there's really not a market for really big paper ships," Rounds said. "This [POST] is my one chance to show my work."

Adam Rung, who works feet away from Rounds, is a woodworker and will be participating in POST for the fourth time. He crafts furniture of domestic hardwood harvested in the mid-Atlantic region, and has been working as a full-time woodworker for 12 years.

"My parents were woodworkers," said Rung, who grew up and apprenticed under his parents in Chambersburg. "Since day one, I've been in the shop."

Rung said that participating in POST as an artist or an onlooker is important because it encourages appreciation for art and handmade crafts.

"In our society, everything is replaceable," Rung said. "It doesn't have a soul, it's disposable. And by buying or even just appreciating what artists and artisans make, you're contributing to the facilitation of that existence, and kind of bucking the societal shift towards stuff that really doesn't matter."

Regardless of an artist's trade, this event benefits the entire Philadelphia economy, according to Rung.

"It's all about buying local," Rung said. "The money goes right back into the economy."

But the coolest part about POST may be that it's a chance to see the personalized workspace of artists, something that can't be seen in a gallery.

"The experience of visiting a studio is really unique," Pirie said. "It's totally different to meet working artists. It's so personal. People are inviting you into their space." ★

For a complete list of participating studios, visit Philadelphia Open Studio Tours' Web site at [www.philaopenstudios.com](http://www.philaopenstudios.com).