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Creating a scene:
Painter and sculptor Maggie Mailer sparks a renaissance in Pittsfield

By Don Aucoin, Globe Staff, 1/6/2004

PITTSFIELD -- A large, unfinished canvas beckons to Maggie Mailer, its turbulent greens and oranges awaiting some kind of resolution, and that glycerine-soap sculpture near the front door isn't going to just finish itself, either.

But Mailer's art will have to wait. A bearded young man has just poked his head into her studio with a question she hears a lot these days. "Are there spaces?" he inquires. "I thought it might be kind of fun to be a storefront portrait artist." Mailer smiles. She has good news: "We just found out about more space."

"That would be great," the young man says. "It's kind of amusing, but cool. Get yourself out there."

If Mailer is annoyed at hearing her brainchild described as "amusing," she doesn't show it. Her temperament is such that she sees and responds to the dream whatever the quirks of the dreamer -- a trait that comes in handy these days as she tries to revitalize Pittsfield's downtown, one artist at a time.

The 32-year-old painter and sculptor is the impresario behind the Storefront Artist Project, an audacious experiment whereby commercial property owners allow artists to set up rent-free studios in vacant retail space in the hope that a jazzed-up cityscape will stimulate business. For the daughter of author Norman Mailer and jazz singer Carol Stevens, it is a project that taps into not just this city's potential but her own. "I've had breakthroughs in my work from people who come in off the street," she says. "It's something about the interaction. A charge happens."

Not a bad description of the effect Mailer has had on the arts scene here. As she has introduced herself to this community in the two years since she moved here, she has not trumpeted her parentage; residents say they learned from others, not from her, of her connection to one of the most renowned literary figures of the past half-century. But her father's electric mind and restless iconoclasm can be seen in Maggie Mailer. There is something Maileresque in her description of the Pittsfield experiment as a way for artists "to engage the world, so you aren't isolated in a white box, so you lose the separation between your inner and outer self." Or in her assertion that she "wouldn't want to do this in Lenox or Stockbridge. I like the fact that Pittsfield has a grittiness to it. It's a working place. . . . There's something too relaxed about Lenox and Stockbridge."

Norman Mailer says he never doubted his daughter's talent -- his home in Provincetown features a sculpture she made at age 16 -- but he harbored other concerns as she moved from Columbia University to a career as an artist. "She never struck me as having a strong, hard, objective idea of what the world might be like," he says. "I was always concerned the world might be too much for her. But that she takes on a project like this shows me I was wrong."

`A kooky idea' It was a dearth of economic, not artistic, activity that propelled Maggie Mailer into her role as leader of what she hopefully -- and deliberately -- calls a "renaissance." When she moved here in late 2001, returning to her Berkshire roots after a decade in New York City, she was dismayed by the number of empty storefronts along North Street, the city's main commercial thoroughfare. "Having just come back from New York, where everyone was talking about the lack of space, I just couldn't stand it," she says. She had also seen in New York how artists could revitalize sluggish areas. Mailer sized up the situation: Artists needed inexpensive studio space in which to work. Commercial property owners needed tenants. Why not marry those needs?

So she began making the rounds of businesses on North Street. She told property owners that there was "a lack of energy on the street." They had noticed that already. Downtown Pittsfield had been sluggish for years, thanks to the one-two punch of massive General Electric cutbacks and the construction of a new shopping mall in nearby Lanesboro. Mailer proposed that property owners allow artists to transform their empty spaces into studios -- with the artists required to pay only for utilities -- until the owners were able to rent out the space. Her argument was that the chance to see artists at work would increase foot traffic downtown and generally provide a spark of life to the city that might pay dividends.

"People thought it was a kooky idea -- and it is!" she says with a laugh. More seriously, she adds: "I was surprised that they, well, got it. . . . They were willing to try anything. They were on the desperate side."

If not desperate, certainly dissatisfied with the status quo. But change seems to be coming to Pittsfield. A new mayor, James Ruberto, was sworn in yesterday, along with several new female city councilors -- elected with the help of a reform group called Women Helping Empower Neighborhoods -- who will transform the previously all-male City Council.

The broader challenge for this Western Massachusetts city of 45,000 is to transcend its image as "the hole in the doughnut" of Berkshire County, the place tourists speed through on their way to Lenox and Stockbridge. "Pittsfield is a raw canvas, if you will," says Peter LaFayette, president of the Berkshire Housing Development Corporation, which made space available to artists. "Pittsfield is still trying to reinvent itself, figure out what it wants to be, after being an industrial city for 100 years."

LaFayette says that along with the creation of quality office space, business leaders here have long believed that Pittsfield needed a thriving arts and entertainment center akin to that of cities such as Portland, Maine. But little happened. "When Maggie Mailer appeared on the scene with this idea, all of a sudden she had a studio in the window of one of the empty storefronts," he says. "She talked about her vision of getting landlords to loan their empty storefronts to artists to create something happening downtown,

something very visual so they weren't dead spaces, and to lay the basis for an artists' community."

He acknowledges that some residents and businesspeople "feel betrayed" by the focus on art and would prefer to concentrate on restoring the city's manufacturing base. Their skeptical view, he says, is: "Poor artists -- how are they going to help the economy?" But LaFayette believes that within a diversified economy, the arts are a logical centerpiece because it is "building on the strength" Pittsfield already possesses, as a home to many artists in the heart of the cultural hotbed that is Berkshire County.

Another strength now possessed by Pittsfield, some say, is Maggie Mailer herself. "She's got an innocent side and a tough side," says Norman Mailer. "She'll take on tough jobs and not be cowed by them." "When Maggie walks into a room, people smile, and that is powerful," says Joyce Bernstein, co-owner of Link to Life, a company that sells personal emergency response systems. She made 1,000 square feet of studio space available to Mailer two years ago. "She's got such a strong persona." LaFayette says Mailer "attracts other artists who want to be around her and her enthusiasm."

Since Mailer came to town, roughly 30 artists have set up shop in five buildings, and another property owner offered free space over the holidays. A stroller down North Street will encounter paintings and prints in one storefront, a window installation featuring a "cityscape of string" in another, sculptures made with found objects in another. Mailer's idea has also begun to create bonds between individualistic artists and a community that was barely aware of their existence. "I have a sense of civic outlook I've never had before," says Douglas Cracraft, a painter and writer who goes by the name of Douglass Truth. "I feel part of a city that wants me to be here." Passersby have grown used to the sight of painters, sculptors, writers, and photographers at work in storefront windows. David Scribner, the editor of The Berkshire Eagle and Mailer's fiance, says the project "puts into the public eye the dreaming mind." (Scribner himself sits in the window of Mailer's studio many evenings, writing fiction at a card table beneath a sign that reads "Storefront Writer.")

A recent open-studio day drew good crowds. "There's a scene starting to bubble up," Mailer says with quiet satisfaction. Before Mailer arrived here two years ago, "dormant would be a kind word" to describe the artistic scene, says Paul Graubard, an artist. "Now you look in a window: Wow, that's interesting. It has a different feeling than just scooting down the sidewalk."

In addition, some new businesses have sprung up downtown, with hopes for more. Beverly Dubiski, who recently opened Bellissimo Dolce, a cafe and bakery on North Street, says Mailer and the other artists have "created a nice atmosphere" that will be a boon to her business. Link to Life's Bernstein says the artists "create life on the street" that will benefit businesses.

A commitment to art While Mailer still pursues her own artistic ambitions, she is also intent on fostering the careers of other artists. "She understands how lonely it can be working in a studio . . . that it cries for kind of holding hands with other artists," says Stevens, her mother, whom Norman Mailer credits for a large chunk of Maggie's talent. "And I think she's fallen in love with Pittsfield. There's a connection she's feeling now

that she hasn't felt for a long time." Maggie Mailer says her sense of connection with others grew more intense after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001; she witnessed the second plane hit the World Trade Center from her father's apartment in Brooklyn. (Her move to Pittsfield had been in the works long before Sept. 11, she says).

Mailer takes pride in the fact that, in her view, the Storefront Artist Project has helped create a city where "the presence of the artists and singers is felt a lot more," and she speaks with enthusiasm and admiration about work not her own. As she helps arrange for studio space, she is looking for artists who are wholly committed to their art and for whom "it could change their life to do this."

Again, spoken like a Mailer. International renown came early to Norman Mailer, with the publication in 1948, when he was just 25 years old, of his extraordinary first novel, "The Naked and the Dead." And pressure -- imposed not by her father but by herself -- came early to Maggie Mailer. "When I was under 25, I was really determined to be a famous artist by age 25," she says. "He was real famous at 25. Almost all of his kids have gone through needing to be famous by age 25. We've all had an ambivalent attitude to the idea of fame. We've had lots of conversations in our family about what it takes to be a great artist."

When Maggie was 16, her father would give her writing assignments, challenging her to write in the style of a particular author or to be a reporter on a story. Then he would edit them while Maggie looked on. "It was intense," she says. She speaks with great affection of both parents -- "I really love both of them; I feel really lucky" -- and says she enjoys tight bonds with the children from Mailer's other marriages. "It's an oddly close family," she says.

A similarly quirky kinship can be seen in the way other artists speak of Maggie Mailer. Cracraft recalls how when he needed studio space last year, Mailer offered to let him use hers for 10 days while she traveled in Europe -- even though the two had not met before. "I said, `That's incredible,' " he says. "And she said, `Artists have to work together.' "

That collegial spirit may be tested as the Storefront Artist Project expands toward Mailer's goal of a bona fide artists' colony. She hopes to win nonprofit status for the project by the end of this month, is eyeing several locations for a headquarters, and plans to incorporate more theatrical and musical performances into the storefront scene. Mailer admits to a "big concern" that her administrative duties will crowd out her art. But she voices no reservations about the city she has made both her home and her mission.

"I don't see myself leaving," she says. "I feel invested. More and more, I feel I'll stay."

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