

# Art amid the farms: Studio tour highlights county's creative side

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Most people around the region know Washington County, N.Y., is a big center for dairy farming, but far fewer associate it with the visual arts.

That may change after the weekend of July 21-22, when 12 professional artists in southern Washington County will open their studios to the public as part of a self-guided tour.

The tour will take participants along a network of rural roads between the Hudson River and the Vermont border, with stops at the farmhouses, renovated barns and old factories where artists have set up studios in recent years and quietly found their inspiration.

Those featured in the tour include painters,

sculptors, ceramic artists, wood carvers and a basket maker, and organizers say all 12 are full-time professional artists whose works are shown nationally and internationally and who were selected by an independent jury.

The concept isn't new, and in fact similar tours are held regularly in other parts of the region whose artistic communities have become better known. The Columbia Berkshire Craft Guild, for example, has staged an open studios tour annually for several years; this year's is planned for November.

But the Washington County tour may grow to include more than just art.

The tour is the brainchild of two ceramic artists, Brenda McMahon and Serena Kovalosky, who said they realized that few people were aware of the range and professional-

ism of the county's artists.

McMahon, who runs Blue Moon Clay Studio in Easton, said their original goal was a tour that also would include stops related to the performing arts and to the county's growing niche agriculture and Slow Food movements. Time and logistical constraints forced them to limit the tour stops this year to those related to the visual arts, but they hope to expand the tour in future years.

"The fine arts, performing arts, and culinary arts of Washington County represent a profound trinity," McMahon said. "Our goal with the tour is to expand and underscore that."

For this year, the studio tour is being coordinated with two performances: a Shakespeare in the Park production of "Twelfth Night," at

7 p.m. July 21 on the lawn of the Georgi Museum in Shushan; and a Music From Salem chamber music concert, at 3 p.m. July 22 at Hubbard Hall in Cambridge. The idea is that those taking the tour will take in the performances after a day of visiting and browsing at artists' studios.

Kovalosky, originally from Whitehall, worked for 15 years in the travel and tourism industry in Montreal before returning to her native county two years ago to focus full-time on her art.

It turns out the features that drew her back to Washington County were among the attractions for the many artists already here: the county's relaxed pace, rolling landscape, an abundance of local produce – and the opportunity to hide away and focus on one's art, far from the pressures of urban living.

"When Brenda and I started collaborating on the Open Studios concept, we realized that it's this 'creative lifestyle' that makes Washington County attractive," Kovalosky said.

"As a Washington County artist," she added, "I feel fortunate to be able to live and create in one of the most peaceful, beautiful, stress-free places on earth."