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Art of Action(TM) Challenges Conventions

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MONTPELIER, VT -- 12/15/09 -- Vermont has long been depicted as an endless parade of quaint, pastoral images whether on postcards or in genteel gallery settings. However, a touring art exhibition, presented by the Vermont Arts Council and underwritten by philanthropist and proprietor of The Vermont Country Store Lyman Orton, aspires to turn those perceptions on their ear in every regard: Start with a collection of paintings that elegantly depict refugees, sprawl and stressed infrastructure and then take it on the road to downtown venues ranging from a busy automobile dealership to an abandoned drugstore and you have "The Art of Action: Shaping Vermont's Future Through Art."

"I was tired of seeing art about Vermont's past," said Orton. "I wanted to encourage artists to explore Vermont's future. I'm a strong believer that art ought not to be simply consigned to galleries and museums. I wanted it to be where people live and work." And so, a quest to secure venues in downtowns throughout the state began in earnest. 23 Vermont towns are hosting the tour through next summer along with a stop at the Russell Senate Office building in Washington, DC this spring.

"More than a little triangulation was required," said Arts Council executive director, Alex Aldrich. "When you are looking for vacant storefronts in downtowns on as little as six months' notice, to be used for only two weeks, it requires finding landlords who are as passionate about the vision as we are. Local ownership and small-town relationships have come through for us and people are turning out in tremendous numbers for these shows," said Aldrich. "And we are finding that folks who have never set foot in a gallery are flocking to each show."

Opening night at Hand Motors in Manchester saw several hundred guests perusing art among Cavaliers and Jettas. A public atrium in downtown Brattleboro hosted a Twitter Town Meeting and became a stop for what was billed as the "Amtrak Art Train." A former drugstore in Randolph and a former video store in Montpelier were temporarily transformed into galleries that drew over 1100 people during their combined four-week run.

"Everybody wins with this arrangement," said Orton. "The host communities get more people coming to their downtowns to shop and eat. And the qualities of the exhibition itself are driving conversations about the future of those communities with towns holding planning meetings and public discussions in conjunction with the tour."

Some in the 'established arts community' have scoffed at displaying art in such venues, and Orton and Aldrich feel strongly that there is great value in the approach. "The work in this collection was based on a statewide citizen engagement process that resulted in a report by the Council on the Future of Vermont. Everyday citizens were heard and drove the contents of the report. It's only natural that the finished work should be shown in places where