

The Toms River Artist Community Buzz

By Pat Johnson

In October of 2023, the Toms River Artist Community nonprofit moved into a new space at 40 Main Street in the heart of Toms River. The 3,000 square foot space is packed with art created by its 160 members—with new artwork hanging every month.

But TRAC is not just a gallery, and it's not just a creative hub for paint parties, ceramic and mixed media workshops, an important part of TRAC's mission is to make art and art-making available to those who may not otherwise have the opportunity or space to make art.

"We are very serious about bringing art to the community especially those with special needs both children and adults," said TRAC President MJ Torres. TRAC partners with the Toms River Elks Lodge to hold art events and workshops every other month for the 'neurodivergent' community. TRAC also coordinates with Ocean County Family Support Organization Inc. and the Toms River Field of Dreams (one of the few special needs playground in the country) to provide art classes.

The TRAC board of directors is also developing an arts program with the New Jersey Reentry Program and other

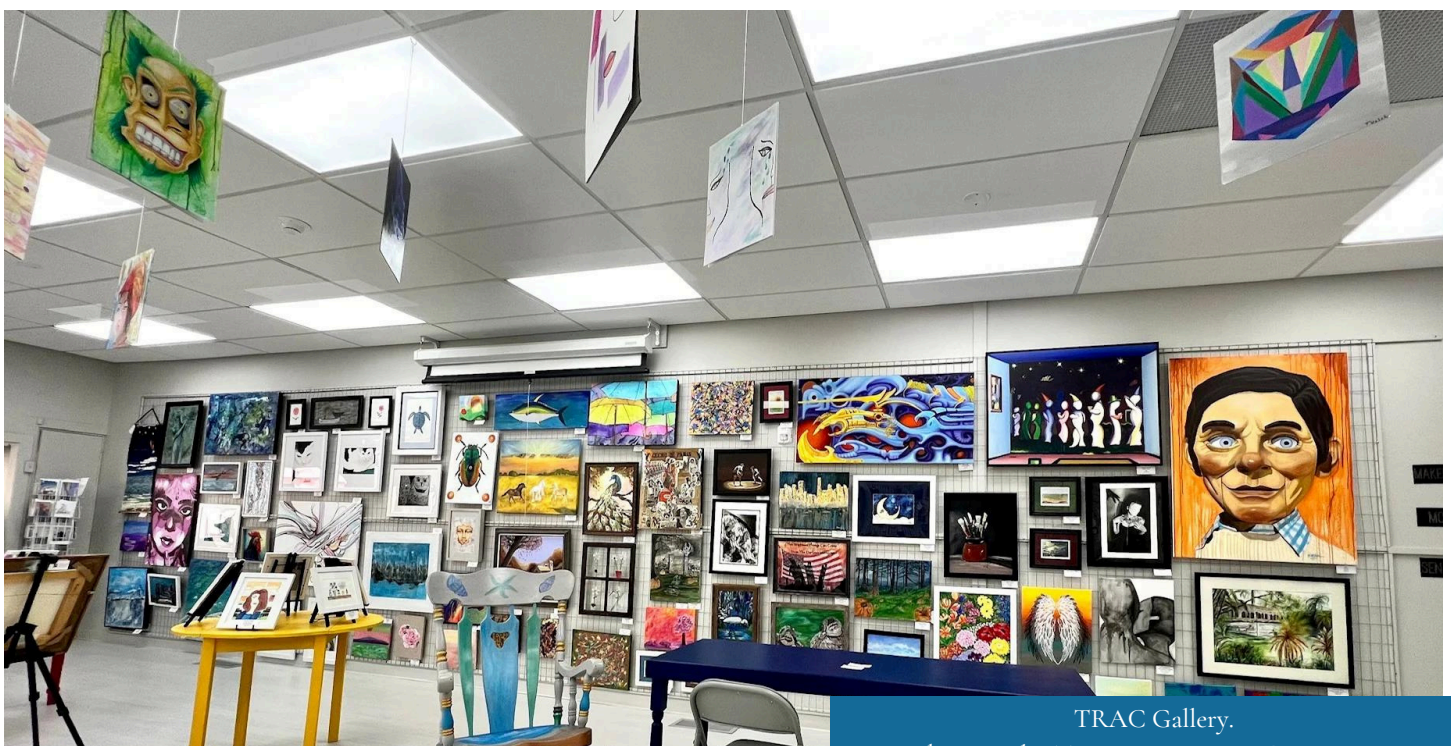
advocates for the homeless. "We would like to give them art classes and help them sell their art so they can have some income."

The Frontier Girls of the Scouts take classes in art and held their first gallery show this year. "We had an opening reception and every painting was sold!" said Torres. "A hundred percent of the proceeds went back to them although they did make a donation."

This is also the third year that TRAC has organized and installed the Ocean County Senior Art Contest and Exhibit. "We had a record number of entries this year, 117," said Torres.

This summer, volunteer TRAC artists created murals at the South Toms River Elementary School. They also donated art supplies. "School systems are cutting back their programs and arts education is the first to go," she noted.

The nonprofit also gives space to local writers and illustrators in their "Book Nook." In June, they held their first Toms River Book Show event with



TRAC Gallery.

Photo credit: Toms River Artists Community.

proceeds going to the Toms River Educational Foundation. “We have quite a few members who have written and illustrated childrens’ books.

Torres is an artist with education and child psychology degrees and a business owner of Craft and Carry Custom Handmade Homegoods. She specializes in portrait engravings on wood, signage and layered wood art that she sells to realtors for client gift baskets. Her more personal artworks take their inspiration from her roots in the Indigenous Taino people of Puerto Rico.

There is the business of making art and then there is the business of selling art. To that end, TRAC also makes space available to artists and makers to sell their work in the gallery. “Many people can’t afford a store front so we provide a space,” she explained. Rents are affordable, from \$25 to \$150.

Torres is the first Hispanic board president and as such, is primed to reach out to the county’s Latinx population. She has contacted the Community Ambassadors of Ocean County to show their art. “Many Organizations can’t afford a sticks and bricks building so we want to be able to give them a home.”

Torres says she hopes TRAC will continue to grow “The more we do, the more we can do through funding,” she said. Recently TRAC received a grant from the Grunin Foundation and receives funding from the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission.

The TRAC Statement of Values is as follows: “An artist community that runs on community involvement and improving our community through art, creativity, honesty, cultural awareness, open-mindedness, loyalty, positivism, motivation, innovation, dependability, passion, respect, compassion, service to others, new adventures, education, fun, (and) teamwork.”

Much is going on at 40 Main Street this fall: Open paint nights from 5 to 8 p.m. continue on the last Friday of every month.



Photo credit: TRAC.

“These are open to members and nonmembers who can come and create or just hang out in a relaxed, welcoming environment.”

The TRAC gallery and office is located at 40 Main Street, Toms River and is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tues through Thursday, Friday and Saturday 11 a.m. till 8 p.m., Sunday 11 a.m. till 5 p.m., closed on Mondays.



Art program at TRAC.
Photo credit: TRAC.