

3,600 artworks. No more room in the house. What to do? Create a private museum in Milwaukee

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John Shannon and his wife, artist Jan Serr, have opened an art gallery unlike any other in Milwaukee. The couple bought a local warehouse on St. Paul Avenue to store their own significant art collection and to provide art storage services to others. One space, however, is dedicated to showing work, their own and local artists. (Photo: Rick Wood/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

You know you have a serious art buying habit when you have to acquire a 65,000-square-foot warehouse, start an art handling business and create your own private museum just so you can look at what you've got.

That is what John Shannon and Jan Serr have done with The Warehouse, a new kind of art space in Milwaukee that will open to the public during Gallery Night & Day, on Friday and Saturday.

The couple had run out of room for their 3,600 or so works of art in their east side home. Yes, 3,600. Or so.

They discovered there were no professional art storage facilities in Wisconsin; the closest was in Chicago and they didn't want to ship their treasures out of the area.

The answer? They bought a warehouse at 1635 W. Saint Paul Ave., and launched Guardian Fine Art Services private museum is the first of its kind. here they store not only their own collection but art for museums and collectors, too. Guardian has museum standard climate control, along with security and a staff of seven, not counting the couple.

They also turned the first floor into an exhibition space. It will feature rotating shows from the couple's collection — which emphasizes self-portraits photography, contemporary Japanese art and a collection of monotypes — and will also show contemporary art by regional artists.

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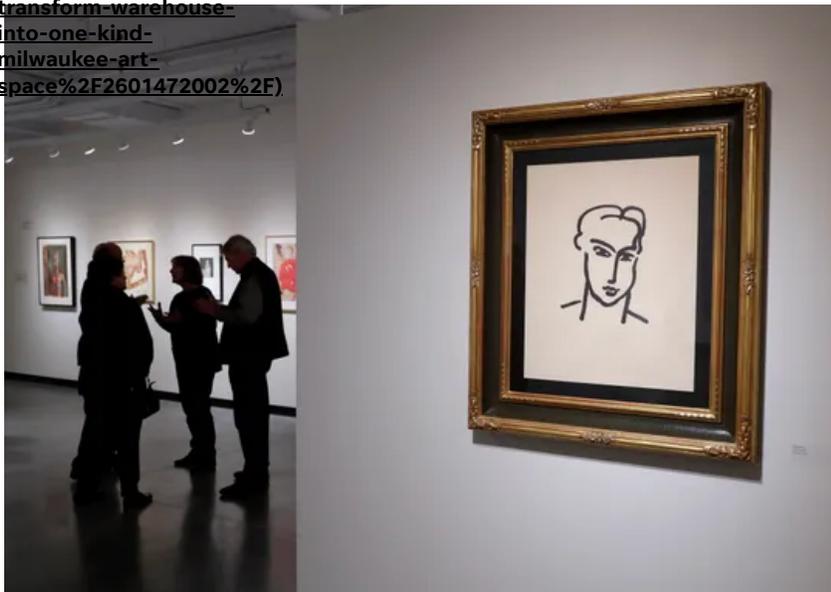
While the art world is filled with jet-setting connoisseurs who erect quasi-private museums for their personal art trophies — Milwaukee has never been one of them.

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Shannon and Serr are getting in on that game, and putting their own spin on the notion of a private museum. Their collection is far from flashy or fashionable. It is deeply personal and idiosyncratic, with countless rivulets created by the couple's curiosities over the years.

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Henry Matisse, untitled, unknown, monotype on paper, is seen on a large wall at the new art gallery. (Photo: Rick Wood/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

In some ways, they are putting their collection on the walls in order to study and understand it — and perhaps themselves, too.

"We had all of this art in our house ... and we wanted to share it," Shannon said, pointing out a few beloved portraits hanging in the gallery space.

At least, share it to a point. The gallery will be open four times a year for Gallery Night & Day, or by appointment. Shannon hopes that arrangement won't be off-putting, and that people will feel welcome.

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Works by Serr, a longtime area artist, are fittingly at the heart of the inaugural show. Her interests in the studio have informed many of the works the couple have purchased over the years, like a small self-portrait by German artist Käthe Kollwitz that Serr bought when she was still an art student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

The show is a family affair in other ways, too. Shannon's rather famous artist brother Tom Shannon also has work up, including the magnetically levitating sculptures he's known for.

"What I enjoy about it, and this is personal, is that it's a living collection," said Laura Sims Peck, curator at The Warehouse. "The people who started it are still here and adding to it."

In March, The Warehouse will present "On Belonging," a collaborative project of Nirmal Raja and Lois Bielefeld, which addresses issues of identity and Milwaukee's urban landscape. It was the only space large enough to accommodate the show, the artists said.

More: [Artists Nirmal Raja and Lois Bielefeld claim their space in Milwaukee \(/story/entertainment/arts/2018/09/19/sari-nirmal-raja-lois-bielefeld/939814002/\)](#)

Later this year, The Warehouse will do a show related to Art Muscle, a seminal art publication from Milwaukee's past, which Shannon and Serr donated funds to have digitized at UWM.

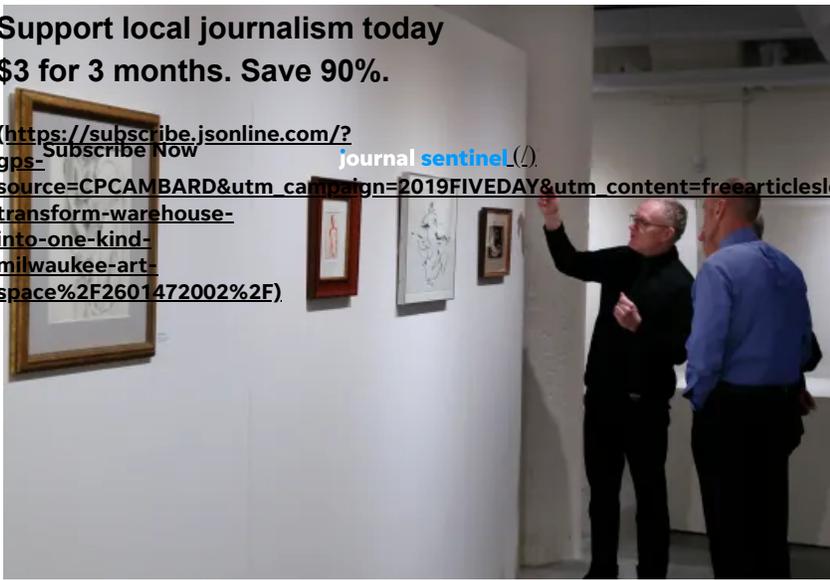
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Guests view artwork in various forms of ink and paper at the opening of the new art gallery. (Photo: Rick Wood/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

The couple, well known for their art-related philanthropy, hope their space will inspire others to collect art as well. If they were to offer tips, Shannon said, it would be to collect artists deeply over the course of their careers, if you don't get priced out of the possibility. Also, he said, buy the best work you can afford and never settle for a second-rate work just because you like an artist.

The work of Wisconsin artists such as Tom Uttech, JoAnna Poehlmann or Mark Mulhern will always be marked with a "W" at The Warehouse, Shannon said. Other artists in the first show include Jim Dine, David Hockney, Alex Katz, Tsukioka Kogyo, Vivian Maier and Sally Mann.

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Shannon says he has ambitious plans for the future of the collection and The Warehouse, though he's a bit coy about it.

"We do have plans," he said. "It may be hard to realize, what we would hope to do. So we'll see."

The Warehouse will be open from 5 to 9 p.m. Friday and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday.

Mary Louise Schumacher is the Journal Sentinel's art and architecture critic. Keep up with the culture and [subscribe to her weekly newsletter, Art City \(/story/entertainment/arts/2018/12/03/art-city-keep-up-culture-sunday-mornings/2129216002/\)](https://www.jsonline.com/story/entertainment/arts/2018/12/03/art-city-keep-up-culture-sunday-mornings/2129216002/). Or email her at mschumacher@journal sentinel.com.

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