Downtown art space closing permanently

Franklin Street Works, a contemporary art space at 41 Franklin St. in downtown Stamford, has permanently closed after a nine-year run.

Franklin Street Works succumbs to coronavirus disruption

By Paul Schott

STAMFORD — Franklin Street Works, one of the state’s leading nonprofit contemporary-art spaces, has permanently closed in response to financial pressures sparked by the coronavirus crisis.

The shutdown culminates a nine-year run for an organization founded by Stamford lawyer and community advocate Kathryn Emmett. Since its 2011 launch at 41 Franklin St., Franklin Street Works had developed a loyal following and forged many community partnerships. But the pandemic struck when the organization was already grappling with fiscal challenges that included the loss of earlier funding sources.

“We had a couple of big pots of funding that had faded away, and there was an effort to cultivate more individual donors,” said Terri C Smith, Franklin Street Works’ founding creative direc-

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Creative Director Terri C. Smith shows a display from a 2019 exhibition at Franklin Street Works.
tor. “We were kind of gearing back up, and we were already a little behind the curve and then COVID happened, with people potentially having less money to donate. It all kind of collided at once.”

Based in a repurposed Victorian row house, Franklin Street Works comprised three main gallery sections. It stood next to the Stamford Art Association and down the street from the University of Connecticut-Stamford’s art gallery.

“Growing up in Greenwich Village in a theater family, I developed a great appreciation for the value that the arts and social gathering places bring to a community,” Emmett said in a statement. “When I first saw the Victorian row houses on Franklin Street in 1976, I imagined the possibility of a space like ours being there. It was a dream come true when Franklin Street Works became a reality.”

Under Smith’s leadership, Franklin Street Works originated 34 exhibitions, developed 130 educational programs and worked with 415 artists and more than 25 guest curators.

Exhibitions focused on social-justice issues and encompassed environmentalism, the LGBTQ+ community, the African diaspora, immigration, labor rights, fake news and punk rock. In addition to showing existing work, Franklin Street Works funded 50 commissioned projects and supported artists in new work that included installations, performances, sculptures and sound art.

It helped to build the careers of many emerging artists who went on to feature at prominent New York City venues such as the High Line, the Museum of Modern Art, SculptureCenter, the New Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Franklin Street Works grew further under the leadership of Executive Director Bonnie Wattles from 2014 to 2018. During that time, the organization developed its membership program and funding sources, forged new community alliances and upgraded a café that operated for several years.

At its peak, Franklin Street Works attracted about 4,000 visitors annually.

“It was an honor to be a part of the Franklin Street Works leadership during the organization’s time of significant growth,” Watts said in a statement. “Terri C Smith’s vision to bring emerging artists, museum quality exhibitions and innovative ideas to Stamford helped position the city as a cultural destination.”

Franklin Street Works collaborated on projects with more than 30 community partners from New York City to New Haven. Its partners included Artspace New Haven, the Avon Theatre, the Center for Contemporary Printmaking, Connecticut Students for a Dream, the Ferguson Library, Purchase College, Social Practice Queens, Stamford Parks, Triangle Community Center, UConn-Stamford and WPKN.

“We attracted people who were inquisitive and smart and caring. We couldn’t have done it without creative people and arts-interested and social-justice-interested people in the region,” Smith said. “It was an open feedback loop: We brought content, visitors came and discussed things and their feedback informed the content.”

The organization garnered the financial backing of groups including the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. It received a $40,000 Warhol grant in 2012 and another for $80,000 in 2017.

But it could not have counted on receiving more Warhol funding this year to help shore up its finances because the foundation prioritizes new applicants. And if it had been allotted a third Warhol grant, it would have only accounted for a fraction of its exhibition budget.

In the past year, Smith had worked alongside the most-recent executive director, Carole Southall. A curator with 25 years’ experience who previously worked at the Housatonic Museum of Art in Bridgeport and Cheekwood Museum of Art in Nashville, Tenn., Smith said she would take some time before deciding on her next professional pursuit.

“It kind of feels like a child has gone to college,” Smith said. “It was an omnipresent organization that, with some other people, I was nurturing all the time. But now I’m going to step back from it. I’m doing a lot of reflection right now.”

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