

B. AMORE



Bill Ramage and the Rutland Renaissance

Walking up the three flights of stairs to Bill Ramage's downtown Rutland, VT, studio is reminiscent of early loft days in New York's SoHo and Tribeca. City sounds abound—tires on asphalt, the chirping of the corner traffic signal—in this small downtown with 108 buildings listed on the historic register. Ramage's studio encompasses the top floor of a commercial building. Emerging from the dim hallway is like entering multiple worlds—each room with its own theme.

The common thread is art. Ramage trained as a sculptor at Philadelphia's University of the Arts, yet drawing was always fundamental to his practice. In the open areas of his studio,

Ramage has combined his meticulous large-scale drawings of figures in various settings to create gigantic sculptural installations. Although he went on to teach bronze casting, modeling and sculpture at Ohio State University, and then was a professor of art for 34 years at Castleton University, drawing has always been his métier.

In 2012, when Ramage was seeking a studio space to develop *papaNova*, a large photo-sculpture installation, he approached Mark Foley, his longtime friend and real estate developer. Foley granted him access to the unused offices in his building on Center Alley—a small sloping street in the business district. The installation unwittingly became the catalyst for four new art galleries and an art partnership that are changing the face of this post-industrial city.

The Center Alley space, which Ramage and his students renovated, became the Alley Gallery. This gallery, and the *second* smaller RUVT Gallery in the Opera House, started out as university-sponsored with an educational mission. By not being commercial galleries, they are able to exhibit art that is both accessible and challenging.

The Alley Gallery, a series of smaller rooms with two adjacent larger spaces, lends itself to intimate work and smaller installations. Through September, they are showing *Thirty-six Views of Home* (inspired by Hokusai's *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*)—a solo exhibition by Ellen Shattuck Pierce, a Rutland native who teaches in the Boston area. This suite of 36 woodblock prints tells Pierce's "truth" from several vantage points and expresses the tensions inherent in her dual role as mother and educator. Her exhibit is followed by three Vermont artists in *Figuration*—*Kate Gridley*, *Bonnie Baird* and *Jerry Rayla*.

In 2014, Ramage was again in need of a venue for *The Rutland Drawing*, a 9 x 43 foot, half-cylinder-shaped homage to the city that took him two and a half years and 350 Faber-Castell pencils to complete. Foley loaned him the former Lake Sunapee Bank. Once Foley saw the bank successfully become a space for art, he approached Ramage with the idea for a *third* gallery: the Castleton University Bank Gallery, now directed by Oliver Schemm, a professor of art at Castleton University. The

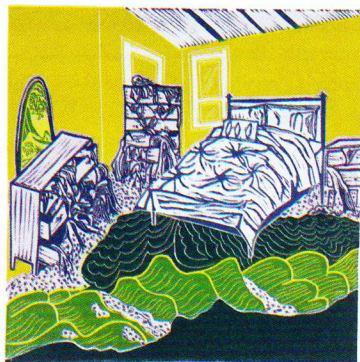
gallery has a triangular shape with the bank's semicircle of bronze and verde-marble teller counters still intact. The unusual space provides an intriguing venue for sculpture. In 2016, the gallery exhibited *The Syrian Experience as Art*, when Rutland welcomed several Syrian refugee families before Trump's travel ban took effect. This summer's exhibit featured local artist and foundry owner Glenn Campbell who creates constructions in plaster and iron, and Mark Burnett, sculpture instructor at Mount Wachusett Community College, who works figuratively in bronze. The next scheduled show, in September, is an abstract textile exhibit by local artist and designer Ken Smith.

When the Green Mountain Power Company (GMP) relocated, and the *Rutland Herald/Times Argus* newspaper moved into their old space at 77 Grove Street, Foley suggested to Ramage that they convert the remaining 3,500 square feet of open space into the 77 Gallery, a fourth gallery. In November 2017, Ramage curated the initial exhibit, *Art of Rutland County*, which featured 33 artists in an array of media and expression. This past summer, Whitney

Ramage, Bill Ramage's Brooklyn-based daughter, organized MASS-MATTER, an exhibit of seven fellow artists from her residency at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA). Inspired by the model, she encouraged the gallery to have its own artists-in-residence program.

77 Gallery is welcoming its first group of artists-in-residence from Milwaukee, Miami, New York and Boston to work and exhibit together through October. Artistic expression ranges from drawing and painting to soft sculpture and multimedia work. The gallery is particularly suited to large-scale work and will also host artist talks and workshops.

After Castleton University withdrew funding from the Alley and RUVT galleries, Ramage and Foley formed an umbrella entity in 2017, ART IS VITAL, that would oversee them. In addition to 77 Gallery, the partnership has two new projects in the works. One is a three-story art makerspace adjacent to the Energy Innovation Center. Its façade will soon be painted with a reproduction of Kazimir Malevich's futuristic painting *Airplane Flying*. A second building, also available as artist



live-work loft studios, is presently the site of Ramage's tribute to Christo and Jeanne-Claude—an installation of stacked, colored oil barrels—based on their *The Wall of Oil Barrels – The Iron Curtain 1961–2*.

Adding to the transformation of this 19th-century marble quarrying and railroad hub to a 21st-century art destination is a new public art series of monumental marble sculptures, celebrating the city's history. Steve Costello, vice president of GMP, conceived the project after a visit to Rapid City, SD, where public art throughout the city draws tourists. He is working with Foley, the Carving Studio & Sculpture Center, Vermont Quarries, GMP's Rutland Blooms (the company's local beautification project), as well as sponsors from the business community to commission and place the finished pieces. *Stone Legacy*, a life-sized stone carver—the centerpiece of this project—is in the newly created Center Street Market Park.

Rutland has a history of partnerships between the arts and business communities. In 2000, the Paramount Theater, an old vaudeville house, was restored with gifts from local benefactors and residents, complementing government, state and city grants. The recently renovated Chaffee Art Center is working with Green Mountain College and the University of Vermont to use the grounds as a classroom for permaculture. And now with four new galleries, thriving art and business partner-

Above: Bill Ramage, *The Christo/Jeanne-Claude Tribute*, 2016.

Left: Ellen Pierce, *Overflow I* from her upcoming *Thirty-six Views of Home* exhibit, 2018, 12 x 12", linoleum print and collage, variable edition. Courtesy of the artist.

Opposite: Bill Ramage in his studio, 2018. Shown in photo: partial views of *Devine Copulation*, 2018 (on the left), and *Self I*, 2016 (on the right). Photo: Robert Layman.

ships, art installations, sculptures and murals everywhere you look, Rutland has reinvented itself into a vibrant crucible for the arts. And for Ramage, whose mantra is "art can save the world" (and whose *Rutland Drawing* is ensconced in the RUVT Gallery), the Rutland Renaissance is a dream that is coming true.

B. Amore is an internationally exhibiting artist and writer. Her reviews appear in *Art New England*, *Sculpture* magazine, *VIA*, and the *Rutland Herald/Times Argus*, among other publications.

Alley Gallery
facebook.com/vtalleygallery

Castleton University Bank Gallery
castleton.edu/arts/art-galleries

77 Gallery
facebook.com/77gallery
77art.org

RUVT Gallery
facebook.com/ruvtgallery