

# Coffee shop offers backroom gallery, features local artwork

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Staff Writer

Coffee-chugging regulars at Donkey Coffee and Espresso, 17 W. Washington St., basked in more than the dim lights, comfortable chairs and espresso-scented air Friday night. The back room's buzz infiltrated the caffeine-saturated atmosphere during the opening of artist Aaron Smith's first Athens County solo show.

Donkey Coffee's large back room, which occasionally features music or poetry, lined its walls with Smith's work and housed a table of refreshments for viewers.

With oil paintings, prints and ink drawings, Smith displayed mobile home scenes he has been working on for seven years, Starbrick Clay owner Ann Judy said. Starbrick Clay, 21 W. Columbus Ave., is a gallery in Nelsonville.

"Basically I chose them as subject matter because I want to inspire reaction from the viewer,"

Smith said. "If I present it in a context of fine art, if I present it without the attachment of negative stereotype myself, then I'm allowing them to come unfettered and deal with what they think."

Smith's aunt, Kathy Stewart, said she likes that Smith is developing the stereotypes and social attitudes toward mobile homes.

"He's making you look at mobile homes a lot differently than you normally do," Stewart said.

Susan Boesch, Smith's mother, said she has seen the actual mobile homes being interpreted but has not seen them as her son's art, shown on the walls of the coffee shop.

Smith said his art is represented because of Donkey Coffee. He said the coffee shop is an asset to the art community — as a new business, they already are offering artists a venue.

"There really aren't that many display venues in Athens City proper. Their (Donkey Coffee's) interest in working with artists and giving us display space is very pos-

itive," Smith said.

Matt Moore, an owner of Donkey Coffee, said they provided an opening for artists Adam Mitchell and Lindy Kehoe during the summer. Booking artists is very competitive, he said, and the shop scheduled artists until February.

Several businesses in Athens, like Casa Nueva Restaurant and Cantina, 4 W. State St., provide a venue for local artists, Moore said.

"We're influenced by Casa," Moore said. "It's the first time I'd seen art in a restaurant."

Despite the months of planning in advance, Judy said starting a show is not easy.

"It's a real opportunity for a lot of artists to be able to have a one-man show and get their work out there to be seen," she said.

Smith's current project is the Nelsonville mural, where he paints Nelsonville in its period of growth. With the help of local teens, he is displaying an image of the public square during the 1910-1920 coal mining and brick boom.



Lindsay Steiner/ Staff Photographer

From left) Kathy Stewart, Tamara Brown, Amy Lipka and Ali Minni discuss the work of artist Aaron Smith. Pieces of mobile home-themed art created by Smith were displayed at Donkey Coffee for the show's opening on Friday evening.