

SULLIVAN COUNTY
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SULLIVAN LIFE

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Once 'outsider artist' finds permanent home

Claryville Art Center hosts works of renowned painter

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ELI RUIZ

Last Saturday, Manhattan attorney and Claryville resident Frank Nicoletti and wife Irina hosted the grand opening for their new Claryville Art Center on the same property as their Blue Hill Lodge at 1471 Denning Road.

The grand opening event doubled as a retrospective of the works of world renowned artist, and close Nicoletti friend, Alexander Kaletski, and was dubbed "Alexander Kaletski: Forty Years in America."

Well known for his paintings on cardboard, often fashioned from boxes he finds on the streets of New York City, the artist fled his native Russia, fearing arrest and politi-

cal prosecution, in 1975. Only officially state designated artists in Soviet Russia were allowed to legally sell their work, which was forbidden from being abstract, surreal or even critical of Soviet life; "socialist realism" was the only style considered acceptable by the then communist regime.

Kaletski would not conform, however, and continued to paint in his style, eventually going underground, discovering a thriving culture that provided him with an audience for his art and songs.

After a short stay in Vienna, Kaletski moved to Rome, eventually landing in New York City, where he initially lived in a welfare hotel. Obsessed with the arts, Kaletski



Russian born artist Alexander Kaletski speaks to the crowd of several dozen who attended last Saturday's Claryville Art Center grand opening event and Kaletski retrospective.



In foreground is Irina Nicoletti, wife to Manhattan attorney and Claryville resident, Frank Nicoletti. Behind her is Frank, left, and Russian born artist Alexander Kaletski.

has done everything from designing fashion fabrics and illustrating books, to teaching Russian, writing music and has even had three books published.

His first love, though, was painting.

Nicoletti and Kaletski's paths would cross once the artist moved to Manhattan. "I had a disco in Manhattan called the Kangaroo Club, on 73rd Street," said Nicoletti. "Alexander lived upstairs and that's when we met... he still uses the very same place."

The pair have been fast friends for 35 years and last Saturday's grand opening marked the culmination of a promise Nicoletti made to Kaletski years ago: "To build him a gallery, right here in Claryville, where he can display his amazing work," said Nicoletti.

Also called "The Kaletski Museum," the Claryville Art Center was fashioned from an old barn and features the very best materials and craftsmanship.

Completed just a few weeks ago, Nicoletti recalled first showing the structure to Kaletski: "So I show him the place and he [Kaletski] says, 'I don't know... it's right here in front, close to the street,'" he explained. So Nicoletti did what any good friend would do: he has the entire structure moved approximately 200 yards away from the street, appeasing his great friend.

Saturday's retrospective offered an overview of Kaletski's development, from his "underground years" in Moscow, through his 40 years of creative work in America, and featured many of the more than two dozen Kaletski works collected by Nicoletti over the last 25 years, including the massive "Paper Balls," completed by the artist in 1996 and purchased by Nicoletti for \$140,000.

"Frank is my oldest friend in America," offered Kaletski. "I was very lucky to live in the

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same building where he owned a business.”

Asked to describe his painting style, Kaletski answered, “Figurative, but not realist... but sometimes I do semi-abstractions.”

With an upcoming November to December show at New York’s prestigious Mary Boone Gallery on 57th Street, Nicoletti joked, “But Alexander and I have an arrangement that he has to die first... the paintings aren’t worth anything until he dies.”

Nicoletti intends to show his Kaletski collection until the artist’s two-month Mary Boone Gallery show ends, and with Anna the owner of her own Chelsea gallery – called Anna Zorina Gallery – Nicoletti says, “I’ll then rotate the collections at the Claryville Art Center based on what they show at Anna Zorina... when they finish showing a particular artist, I’ll just ask if they can ship it up here

“Who would ever have believed that Claryville would be the cultural center of Sullivan County?” Nicoletti wondered.



This Alexander Kaletski painting is called “Fragile Clouds of Love,” was completed in 1987 and is part of the extensive collection of Kaletski art owned by Claryville’s Frank Nicoletti.



From left; Anna Zorina, Alexander Kaletski, Town of Denning Supervisor David Brooks, Frank Nicoletti and wife Irina just before the official ribbon cutting at last Saturday’s Claryville Art Center grand opening event and Alexander Kaletski retrospective.