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A Home for the Homemade

Etsy allows local artists to share their wares in an online market

story by Karla Kane • photos by Vivian Wong

Artists often struggle to promote their homespun goods, yearning to be seen amidst the big-box retailers. Shoppers, meanwhile, strive to find the perfect gift or the most specialized item, not easy in an off-the-rack age.

But since the advent of Etsy (www.etsy.com) four years ago, crafty folks the world over, including in and around Palo Alto, are now able to offer up their work with the click of the mouse while savvy shoppers can easily access a plethora of unique creations.

The Brooklyn-based Etsy, which launched its website in 2005, bears the motto “Buy, Sell and Live Handmade,” and handmade, craft-supply and vintage items are the only types of goods permitted for sale.

Etsy currently boasts 4.2 million users, more than 400,000 of them sellers, and 5.4 million items listed for sale. 2009 saw gross merchandise sales of \$180.6 million.

The social connections fostered by Etsy, with buyers readily able to communicate with sellers, is part of the site’s success.

“A big part of Etsy’s popularity is due to the fact that it’s connecting people. Yes, there’s a lot of cool stuff on there, but what’s even more appealing is that you can meet the people creating these objects and have a dialogue with them,” Etsy spokesman Adam Brown said.

The goal of Etsy, founded by artist Rob Kalin, is to offer an alternative to both the generic, mass-marketed goods available in stores as well as to the auction-style marketplace of such websites at eBay.com. And Etsy is open to anyone — from the professional, full-time art merchant selling hundreds of items to the



Left: Courtney Jasiulek of Palo Alto sells her handmade blank books and hollow books on Etsy. Above: Jasiulek’s materials include an awl, thread, paintbrushes and glue.



Some of Courtney Jasiulek’s handmade notebooks, which she binds herself.

first-time crafter or hobbyist.

Etsy sellers start by paying a small fee (20 cents per item for four months). If an item is sold, the seller also pays a 3.5-percent transaction fee.

Sellers set up their profiles and customized banners (“Choose your username carefully,” Brown said — it can’t be changed — and make sure to have great photographs) and decide their own shop policies, such as how to handle shipping.

“It’s not very difficult to use, or expensive, and you learn as you go,” Brown said.

Local craftspeople are taking part in the Etsy trend and finding there is a home out there for each of their one-of-a-kind offerings, including glass paintings, eggshell art, goddess greetings and hand-bound books.

Molly Trezise (Etsy name: MollyTrezise) uses stencils and spray paint on glass to create bold and colorful designs, often featuring animal or human portraits against swirling patterned backdrops.

“I opened my little shop a year ago,” said the stylish Trezise, who resides in Stanford University’s Escondido Village with her graduate-student fiancé.

“I had been doing some custom artwork, and someone at my office suggested I try Etsy.”

Her “Designs by Molly Trezise” shop welcomes browsers with a tie-dye yellow and pink banner and a note informing potential buyers that each item in her online gallery is one-of-a-kind, “no prints or reproductions.”

Highlights of her collection include a series of chicken portraits, commissioned as a wedding gift for a couple with beloved pet hens; paintings of black cats on vibrant backgrounds; and custom portraits of children.

“The bright colors and fun patterns” along with her ability to do custom paintings make her work attractive as gifts, she said. “People like that it can be collaborative,” she added.

Mary Vogt, a Kansas City resident who purchased one of Trezise’s works through Etsy, said she had been searching for a gift for her daughter-in-law, a swim coach, and found Trezise’s \$70 portrait of a swimmer, outlined in

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Jennifer Barrows of Mountain View displays the materials she uses to create hollowed egg ornaments.



One of Barrows' egg ornaments depicts a "tiki" man in a coconut-style egg.



A hollowed egg ornament with a breakfast theme.

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black and blue against a lime-green checked pattern, to be the perfect choice.

"Molly's work, painting on glass, is beautiful and ... unique. My daughter-in-law loves the piece," she said.

Trezeise said she's pleased with her Etsy experience thus far.

"It's going really well," she said. "I'm selling a couple of pieces a month."

Trezeise minored in art at Wellesley College and has always been involved with drawing and painting, but she said she isn't looking to make it a full-time gig at this time.

"I work at a nonprofit in San Francisco. I don't have a 'game plan' to do art full time."

Because of the effort involved in creating her works, they sell for around \$70-\$100 a piece. She said she's sold about 40 pieces through Etsy and earns, on average, \$250 monthly.

Trezeise is also herself a loyal Etsy shopper.

"For the holidays I think I purchased most, if not all, of my gifts from other artists selling on Etsy, and I've certainly picked up a number of things for myself, too. I love supporting other small-scale artists like myself. There are so many talented people selling their work," she said.

Trezeise said Etsy is probably not the ideal platform for a career in her type of art because of the higher prices of her portraits. She estimates that each piece she creates costs her \$12 in materials.

She said she would probably need an order for a large amount or a line of pieces, such as would be sold in shops or galleries, to earn a living from art.

"It's almost impossible to have that be your job," she said. "Anything that I earn selling art is a very pleasant 'extra.'"

She is, however, working on a different style of art that she hopes to have available on Etsy in the near future: a line of pen-and-ink drawings as custom wedding invitations, featuring woodland creatures and outdoor themes.

"Etsy's great for selling really creative, interesting things for cheap," she said.

Hollowed eggs featuring delicate owls, religious motifs in miniature, teeny waffles and even President Barack Obama are featured in Jennifer Barrows' (Etsy name: Eggenius) online shop.

The former Palo Alto, current Mountain View and soon-to-be Fremont resident said she first heard about Etsy on National Public Radio and checked it out "just to look at other people's stuff." By the fall of 2008, she was selling her own original creations — detailed eggshell ornaments and dioramas.

She first learned the craft from her sister-in-law and then "got rather obsessed," she said, sometimes spending up to four hours a day on her projects during the holidays. She makes gifts for 20 family members ("including the dog") annually, plus some for friends and colleagues. She decided to sell some of her work to offset some of the costs.

"It takes lots of glue, a lot of patience, a lot of pins," she said of her egg art, which she sometimes works on when taking a break from grading piles of papers (Barrows is an art-history professor).

"I used egg-making to save my sanity. I find it very calming.

"My husband jokes that it took over the dining room," she said of her workspace, but added she's kept her supplies mostly contained to a desk and bookshelf.

"In the new house, I'll have all the supplies in my office," she said.

Her pieces are made mostly from chicken eggs, with occasional quail, duck and goose eggs. She frequents hobby shops to obtain the tiny trinkets that inhabit the eggshells and keeps boxes filled with sequins, ribbons, buttons and trimmings of every color on hand.

Vivacious and warm, Barrows said taking up traditional artistic fields such as painting or sculpting never appealed. Instead she enjoys creating mini-masterpieces in short time spans.

"A lot of art takes years, whereas I can have a finished product in a week. It's a nice creative outlet," she said.

"More or less all my revenue supports my 'egg habit,'" Barrows said. She's sold around 20 eggs at \$15 each on average in her first year on Etsy, with business picking up around the egg-centric Easter holiday and Christmas, when people are looking for ornaments.

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**NOTICE OF A PUBLIC MEETING
of the City of Palo Alto
Architectural Review Board (ARB)**

Please be advised that Thursday, April 15, 2010, the ARB shall conduct a public hearing at 8:30 AM in the Council Chambers, 1st Floor, 250 Hamilton Avenue, Palo Alto, California. Any interested persons may appear and be heard.

2500 Embarcadero Road [09PLN-00224]: Request by Save The Bay, on behalf of the City of Palo Alto, for Site and Design Review for a new 560 square foot greenhouse and a 625 square foot shed (replacing the existing 400 square foot shed) adjacent to the existing Duck Pond. The project involves the minimal removal of vegetation to accommodate the new structures; existing trees are not impacted. Zone: PF(D) Environmental Review: An Initial Study has been completed and a Draft Mitigated Negative Declaration has been prepared for this project in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requirements.

The City of Palo Alto does not discriminate against individuals with disabilities. To request accommodations to access City facilities, services or programs, to participate at public meetings, or to learn more about the City's compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), please contact the City's ADA Coordinator at 650.329.2550 (voice) or by e-mailing ada@cityofpaloalto.org.

**Amy French
Manager of Current Planning**

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trauma, the mind opens up.”
Wayshak, who proudly sports the purple and green T-shirts bearing her designs, originally sold the “divinely inspired” images on apparel items through her own website (www.groovygoddess.com). About a month ago, she started her Etsy shop to sell her designs in the form of greeting cards, sold both individually (\$3.50) and in sets of 10 (\$30).

The ease with which Etsy is able to link up with other social-networking sites, such as Facebook.com, is one of Wayshak's favorite features.

“It's great to have an outlet with a social component. It's really changed who can be reached,” she said.

Kate Wolf-Pizor, a faculty member at Palo Alto's Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, said she was excited to purchase Wayshak's work because it was relevant to her school's program in women's spirituality.

“The goddess comes into the world in so many ways,” she said.

Fellow Los Altos resident and Etsy seller Vanessa Barri (Etsy name: Rasbarri) has also purchased products featuring Wayshak's art.

Barri said, “Etsy users often shop and search for other local Etsy users. We see the value in handmade, sustainable items. No mass manufacturing. All is made with love and creativity.”

A relative newcomer to Etsy, Wayshak is optimistic about her prospects.

“I just opened my shop one month ago. In that month, I got three sales which, I have been told by other ‘Etsians’ in the community chats, is a great start. I netted around \$50,” she said.

Though she continues to work a day job as a business-development consultant, she is embarking on an e-mail marketing campaign directing potential buyers to her Etsy store and plans to make her burgeoning artistic career a bigger part of her life. “That's the goal,” she said.

Courtney Jasiulek of Palo Alto (Etsy name: TealStripes) creates handmade blank books and hollow books, using collage techniques to create a range of



Molly Trezise of Stanford sits with the portraits she creates with stencils and spray paint on glass.

cover and interior designs. Her Etsy shop description states she finds inspiration from a variety of sources, “from cute to simple and elegant.”

A benefit of Etsy, Jasiulek said, is that “everything's in the seller's control.”

The youthful, bespectacled Jasiulek prides herself on the careful work she puts into making imaginative and engaging product descriptions to help attract customers, along with an eye-catching banner.

For example, her “The Lion Says” notebook — decorated with an orange-striped cartoon lion and a comic-book-style “speech bubble” on the cover that then repeats as a motif on the inner pages — is featured with some suggestions for use.

“Write ideas, dreams, wishes, worries, thoughts, daily rants. Write funny phrases in the speech bubbles! Color the little lions blue, green. Doodle on the blank pages!” she writes.

Gunn High School graduate Jasiulek has her bachelor's degree in fine arts (learning book-binding techniques her senior year) and is currently earning her teaching credentials at San Jose State University. She, like many, first found Etsy as a buyer, although she said she's now made more money selling items there than she's spent buying them.

“I really liked the idea that there is a place on the Internet to sell handmade goods,” she said. “It took me a few months to work up the nerve to sell anything. You really have to think carefully to come up with an interesting title and design, descriptions and tags.”

She currently sells three or four books a month, netting around \$60, but fears that her relatively high-priced items (\$13-\$25 per book, with Jasiulek spending around \$8 to create each piece) could turn off potential shoppers who can buy mass-marketed books for much cheaper through other outlets.

“It's hard to compete,” she said. But her carefully crafted works of paper art have found fans all over the world, thanks to the connections Etsy allows.

“I've sold things to some far-off places, like Canada and London,” she said. “That is pretty cool.” ■

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