

Monohasset Mill emerges as an arts bastion

BY IAN DONNIS

Although the capacious Mill City Gallery remained largely vacant as Clay Rockefeller surveyed the scene earlier this week, full-blown visions of 14-foot knitting needles and the backhoes required to operate them were already cavorting in his head. With five days until an opening featuring Dave Cole's oversized needles and the work of three other artists, "We still have a lot of priming and painting to do," Rockefeller observed. "It's going to be an exciting push."

The gallery, part of the Monohasset Mill Project at 532 Kinsley Ave. in Providence's Promenade District, has hosted events ranging from a punk rock show to a fund-raiser for an Olneyville community group, since the mill -- a mix of affordable housing for artists and market-rate units -- was formally dedicated in June. In this short time, the gallery has become an important public space for displaying art and bringing together disparate strands of the larger community. The latest effort, the art opening on Saturday, November 10 from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m., promises to be Mill City's most ambitious effort to date.

Highlighting a common theme of the borders between different media, the installation features sculpture, paintings and prints by Cole, Jill Moser, Neal Walsh and Mark Maynard. Maynard, for example, is a sculptor, but his work resembles furniture, while Walsh's paintings have something of a sculpted quality because of their depth, texture, and the materials they incorporate. And the 14-foot pine knitting needles, reputedly the world's largest? They reflect Cole's emphasis on work and labor as a central part of identity. The show, curated by Rockefeller and Sara Agniel, will run through November 18.

While the art promises to be fun and thought provoking, what really sets Mill City apart is the gallery's overriding mission of narrowing the divide between different parts of the community, such as Brown University and Hispanic residents of Olneyville. One possibility under consideration is a lecture series with simultaneous translation into Spanish. "I'm just trying to keep the space as active as possible, with as many different kinds of mediums as possible," says Rockefeller, a Brown student and one of four principals in the Monohasset Mill, who's programming the gallery on a volunteer basis.

And while Providence is often cited as a haven for artists, it's clear that Mill City fills an important need as a forum for the arts.

Ian Donnis can be reached at idonnis@phx.com.