

Art and Bodega brings good vibes to Packing House

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The Claremont Packing House recently welcomed a tiny new tenant that is a throwback of sorts: the 48-square-foot kiosk Art and Bodega.

The reimagined newsstand concept is the creation of graphic designer and Upland resident Rebecca Ustrell, who's also the founder and creative director of the nonprofit publishing group, Curious Publishing. She along with her husband, store manager Sam Signer, hold down the fort Wednesday through Sunday.

From the outside it looks like an average newsstand one might see in a large, metropolitan city. One step inside and it's not much different. Ustrell says call it whatever you want.

"Our store is called Art and Bodega because we have art and we have convenience items," she said. "We say 'newsstand' more as like a feeling that you get from a newsstand."

The kiosk has knick-knacks, tchotchkes, art and printed material like the COURIER and Curious Publishing's quarterly magazine, and novelty and specialty packaged snack and drink items. Speaking to the food aspect, Ustrell said it's recession-proof business 101.

"People will always buy soda at a low price point," she said. "We'll always sell something when we're open. Obviously it's scary to think that you'd open a stand and go, 'Oh, I hope someone buys art today.' In reality ... that isn't something I felt like I could rely on because it's niche — it's an art magazine mostly geared toward millennials and Gen Z, not for everyone."

Signer said the decision to open in Claremont wasn't really based on location. However, he recognizes Claremont is the gateway between Los Angeles County and the Inland Empire and said, "It's actually a pretty nifty location to have something like this."

In early 2021, Ustrell registered on a waitlist for a vendor's stall on the first floor of the Packing House, normally where historic artifacts and artwork is displayed. After a year and half wait, she got the important call offering her a familiar space.

"This one used to house my friend's project, Node Plant House. So just plants but our magazine was in there," she said. "We've kind of always been in here for the last year or so."



Rebecca Ustrell and Sam Signer talk about their latest venture, Art and Bodega, located at the Claremont Packing House. COURIER photo/Andrew Alonzo

Between 2015 and 2018, Ustrell was the volunteer event coordinator for the Village Marketing group. A routine part of her job was scheduling and placing artists who'd be exhibiting their work in the Packing House.

"I have a lot of history in the Packing House so it's kind of interesting to me that I'm opening a stall here," she said.

The kiosk is an extension of Curious Publishing, an artist-focused nonprofit widely known for its quarterly magazine Curious, which is available at the kiosk. The name for both the magazine and nonprofit are derived from an early 2018 pop-up gallery event hosted by Ustrell at the Garner House in Claremont titled "Curious Pleasures."

"I like the word curious," she said. "It's nice and round. I think it encompasses the look of the magazine and all of the weirdness that goes into local arts."

With a background in web layout and print design, Ustrell pieced together the first edition of Curious magazine for a pop-up event in September 2018. It was supposed to be a one-off guide for a show featuring Ustrell, her friends, and other artists. It was themed millennial pink and was a hit with the hundreds that attended, who started asking about the next issue.

Ustrell quickly drew up a new logo, called out to artists and asked if they would be interested in having their work published, and the second Curious, titled "Revenge," was issued three months later in December 2018.

"Looking through my old magazines, I found an old magazine that had the title revenge, and I was like, 'That could conjure up some feelings,'" Ustrell said.

During the second show, Ustrell was approached by a representative of The Arts Area, a fiscal sponsorship and nonprofit financing group. The conversation turned to the rep asking Ustrell if she'd like to be the company's "guinea pig" and sign on as one of the first start-ups they'd offer services risk-free.

"It felt right," Ustrell said. "I thought about it and then I signed on as their first project so that's how we get our nonprofit status."

About a year and-a-half after starting Curious Publishing, Ustrell began getting inquiries from inde-

pendent artists looking to publish their work in a printed medium.

"Now that's half the business: publishing other people's work in the form of books, print collections, small zines, newspapers, kind of whatever format they're into," she said of the project's growing influence over the past four years.

Ustrell laid out a few of Curious Publishing's short- and long-term goals. She hopes to one day own her own publishing house but that's years down the line. A short-term goal has already been realized thanks in part to the new kiosk: reaching more aspiring local artists.

"We meet a new collaborator at least three times a week," Ustrell said. "There's always someone coming of age that has that fire burning in them where they have this project where they just need a little inspiration and access to realize it."

"The demand of young artists to see themselves inked on a print medium is something that's here. There's definitely a tangible aspect that you cannot replicate from having your art printed out and handed to someone, in their hand."

"That's the hope: that we continue to get people to see themselves in our publication and also be part of the voice that we're trying to amplify. We're really trying to boost people of color. That's number one. Now we have that criteria in our bylaws and mission statement that we represent primarily Inland Empire and Los Angeles [Black, Indigenous, people of color], queer, and women artists. We got to do at least 80 percent of that or else we're not hitting our mission."

For artists interested in connecting with Curious Publishing, visit curiouspublishing.org.

The Art and Bodega kiosk is located on the southern side on the first floor of the Claremont Packing House, 532 W. First Street. It's open Wednesday through Sunday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5:30 to 9 p.m.

On Saturday, November 12, the space will hold its first poetry night, "A Night of Tenderness," from 7 to 9 p.m. For information and updates on the kiosk, visit its Instagram page by searching "artandbodega."

"We hope to do more micro events, micro art moments in our space and maximize the square-footage as much as we can to get people to just be aware of what we're doing here," Ustrell said, "and just kind of create its own little artsy, reading, coffee biome."



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