

# THE ART OF MAKING ART: Sondheim in the Catskills

By William Quirk

The Say What? Contemporary Art Gallery in Tannersville has a unique concept.

The gallery organizes its shows by inviting artists to respond to a curator-chosen quote.

“Our approach is to pair visual expression with the written word. We select a literary quote, and invite artists to create a piece that reflects their reaction to the quote,” said the gallery’s co-founder, Elena Patterson. The gallery mounts six professional shows a year, as well as an annual winter event that showcases the work of local high school students.



Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine on the Broadway set of *Sunday In The Park With George*.

This year, curator Ed Cachianes, who runs an ongoing film program at the gallery, suggested an exciting theme for the student show. A longtime friend of famed Broadway composer Stephen Sondheim, Cachianes asked the composer if he might sponsor this special event. The composer was enthusiastic.

## CONNECTING THE DOTS

“Steve is a staunch advocate of arts education,” explained Cachianes. “I felt confident that this project would appeal to him. I asked him to select one of his lyrics to serve as the inspiration for the students.” A long-time supporter of education through the arts, Sondheim founded The Young Playwrights Festival, dedicated to developing and promoting the work of aspiring playwrights, in 1981. He is also the co-creator, with writer James Lapine, of the 1984 Pulitzer Prize winning musical, “*Sunday In The Park With George*.” The musical explores the life of pointillist painter Georges Seurat, and the creation of his masterpiece “*Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of la Grande Jatte*.”

“Sondheim. Seurat. Children and art. A composer’s response to the art world. The connections were ripe,” said Cachianes, who also has a personal connection to the musical. “I attended the developmental workshops, as well as nearly every preview. I would then consult with Steve about my impressions, acting as a friendly sounding board. Not that I had any impact on the show, but it afforded me a front row seat for the creation of the piece, and the privilege of encouraging a mentor. It was an invaluable learning experience. An education, to quote the show, in “the art of making art.”



Curator Ed Cachianes at the gallery.

## PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Tannersville High School art instructor Ritamary Montano-Vining was enlisted to supervise the students’ projects. “Ritamary was invaluable,” noted Cachianes. “She poured her heart into the project. I have the utmost respect and admiration for her as an educator. She also happens to be a lovely human being. She not only guided the students, she genuinely inspired them. She awakened in them an appreciation for both Sondheim and Seurat.” Cachianes screened a film version of the musical for the class. He discussed the impact of both Seurat and Sondheim in their respective disciplines. Students were encouraged to use any media to explore their reaction to the quote.

Gallery manager Christopher Cade commented, “For last year’s student exhibition, the gallery formed a small judging panel tasked with awarding prizes to selected students whose work we felt merited acknowledgement. We awarded cash stipends and art supplies. Ed asked Sondheim if he might like to single out a few submissions in the current show, and we would present this year’s students with awards as well. Sondheim agreed with one proviso: “As long as no one feels like a loser or second-rate, fine with me,” he said.



“*Sunday's disappearing*” a sculptural installation by Elijah Ruoff and Emily Thorpe.



*"Things that Count" a photographic assemblage by Gabriella Legari*

The students' work included sculpture, paintings, drawings and found-object art. Some of the pieces were group collaborations. More than a dozen works were hung in the exhibition, which also featured reproductions of studies by Seurat, displayed to illustrate the French artist's creative process. On December 14, seventy guests and patrons gathered in the gallery to celebrate the opening. The participating stu-

dents were overwhelmed by the demonstration of support. "The opening was magical," noted Mr. Cade. "Truly a special event." Sondheim struggled with the daunting task of awarding prizes. He carefully reviewed digital scans of all the work, sharing them with James Lapine. Sondheim stated: "All I can say is that they are all stunning. The flow of imagination, the attention to detail, etc.—all of it is just wonderful."



*The students display gifts from Sondheim.*

And the winners?

With a flourish, Cachianes unveiled a wall of framed prints, gifts from the legendary composer: each student received a personally inscribed Seurat print from Mr. Sondheim.

"An easy choice in the end," noted Cachianes. He then cited another lyric from the Sondheim show, adding: "Notice every tree."

*The Say What? Contemporary Art Gallery is located at 6042 Main Street in Tannersville. Please visit [www.say-what-ny.com/](http://www.say-what-ny.com/) to view the gallery archives.*

*William Quirk is a novelist who resides in NYC.*

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