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Everything From A to Zenith: An Eclectic Venue Calls It Quits

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Seventh Street is about to get a lot quieter. Washington's loudest, buzzingest close-talker of an art dealer -- a walking spark plug, really -- is closing up shop. Margery Goldberg, director of Zenith Gallery for 31 years, has run out of gas. The 58-year-old spent the past several years caring for a dying parent, which had her boarding planes over months at a time. That, added to the constant juggle of keeping afloat her 2,400-square-foot space -- with its \$50,000-a-month overhead -- became too much to handle. Although Zenith's closure coincides with a dramatic economic downturn (Goldberg announced the gallery's impending departure in December), its end was planned two years ago.

"The gallery business has gotten so cumbersome, it's 95 percent schlepping," Goldberg says. "It was time to make life a little simpler. When you have to sell as much as I do, it's like a slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am. I want to spend quality time with my clients." To the Washington art establishment, Goldberg is the anti-dealer. Discretion? Restraint? Leave that to the others.

And her gallery? No cherry-picked selection here: Zenith assaults the retinas with neon art, humor art, realist portraiture, jewelry -- all of it hung, piled or stuffed into, or on, every available surface. And now Goldberg is doing what no dealer would ever dare: She's having a sale. To rid herself of as much inventory as she can by the gallery's March 29 closing date, she has marked down artworks from 15 percent to 75 percent.

At the gallery's final party -- a sweaty event Saturday night that was billed as Zenith's "Grand Finale on 7th Street: The End of an Art Era" -- Goldberg appeared on a gallery landing wearing a green polyester dress, an ostrich feather purse and a sand-dollar-size ring on her right hand. After snapping the crowd to attention with a barked "I fed you. Shut up!" she reminded the gathering of the evening's purpose: "It's not a show, it's a sale!"

All around her, crinkled price stickers boasted bargains to be had. Someone had already snapped up Joey Manlapaz's art deco canvas, but Davis Morton's "Killer Kitten," a clutch of roller girls painted in a neo-French-salon style, remained up for grabs -- "Original \$6,000 / Sale \$4,800 (20% off)."

"It's irrelevant, a style, a taste," Goldberg said at the party, as if addressing the haters and her lack of media attention (including, truth be told, this critic, who wrote about Zenith exactly twice since assuming this column in November 2000).

"Obviously, it means something to all these people," she said, gesturing at the overflow crowd. "People have loyalty to me."

"Margery does stuff nobody else does," said artist and Zenith partisan Marie Ringwald, on hand to toast the gallery. "She has such an eclectic group, such a range of objects. Everything looks like it's all over the place -- there's nothing quite like it. It's a loss."

Zenith's departure marks a fresh deficit for an already depleted stretch of Seventh Street. Pennsylvania Quarter Neighborhood Association Executive Director Jo-Ann Neuhaus, a longtime Goldberg partisan, ticked off two recent disappointments: the Textile Museum's reversal of plans for a Seventh Street annex and the closing of Olsson's last year. And now, Zenith.

"Margery was a very active participant in the neighborhood," Neuhaus said. "She animated the street."

Although Zenith's landlord is negotiating with local retail outfits, no new tenant has been secured.

Still, it's not at total loss. Goldberg promises to continue her presence in Penn Quarter by mounting exhibitions at Eleven Eleven Sculpture Space (the lobby of an office building) and on the walls of local theaters. Her nonprofit Zenith Community Arts Foundation will partner with area charities in community service and fundraising.

And Goldberg will continue to sell art. She plans a gallery for the basement of her Shepherd Park home, where her studio and wood shop are located (Goldberg is a wood sculptor; those neon and wood sculptures at Zenith are hers). She will continue to manage her artists' careers, as well as host events and tours. There is talk of opening a space in a hotel-restaurant-arts complex at Fifth and I NW, but no firm date has been established.