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It's Showtime!

[BUSINESS]

Season's Greetings

Vermont artists play the card market

by [Brooke Hunter](#) (12/20/06).

Katharine Montstream was stranded. It was winter and very cold. She had three children and four bags of groceries, and the only key to her car was locked inside it. Fortunately, she was in the parking lot of City Market, and she soon found someone to give the family a ride home. Upon arriving at her house, Montstream wanted to give the Good Samaritan a token of appreciation, so she ran inside, grabbed 20 cards, and handed them to the driver. When the woman saw them she exclaimed, "I know these cards. I love these!"

People do care about greeting cards — or so the \$7.5 billion industry would suggest. In an era increasingly dominated by email and instant messaging, cards are a tangible, and more personal, way to connect with someone. Jenn Jarecki, manager of Scribbles, explains her theory about why more than 90 percent of all American households purchase cards every year. "You feel closer to a person when you can see their handwriting," she says, "and the card they've chosen that is specific to you."

Holiday cards are especially important, Jarecki says, because they are "a way of giving a piece of yourself to someone when you can't visit them." About 20 percent of the cards Scribbles carries are the work of area artists.



DESIGNER: KATHARINE MONTSTREAM

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Rave Reviews

Two local college grads go from
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Missing Moment

A young writer remembers Grace
Paley

"Vermonters are proud people," Jarecki says. "They like to keep things local, and the cards by local artists remind them of where they live and what they love."

Vermont cards range from scenic photos to intricate collages, while Vermont card businesses range from shoestring operations to lucrative ones with national distribution. Here's a sampling of the affordable local art you can find on racks.

Katharine Montstream spends most of her days in her studio working on oil and watercolor paintings. When she began her career painting vibrant florals and Vermont images, she wasn't thinking about putting them on cards. But when she married Alan Dworshak in 1988, she made her own thank-you notes to send out after the wedding. "People really loved them and told me I should try to sell them," she recalls. So she found a couple of local retailers to do just that. Two years later, Montstream had made more than 15,000 cards and realized she'd reached a ceiling. "I couldn't keep up the pace," she says.

That's when she and Dworshak found reps to wholesale the cards, which are now available in hundreds of markets around the country. Managing the business has allowed Dworshak to be "completely self-employed," says Montstream. In fact, the cards have become a family affair: Her mother-in-law, Jane Dworshak, boxes them from August to December.

The images Montstream paints for her cards have a more festive feel than does her work as a whole. The colors are brighter, and she often paints objects that are specific to occasions — a bunch of balloons for a birthday card; sleds or wreaths for Christmas. While she does offer blank cards with pretty Vermont landscape and floral motifs, Montstream's holiday line is the most popular. Many corporations use them for their end-of-year greetings, she notes. She discovers aphorisms to print inside the cards in "traditional old Christmas carols" or uses simple, universal concepts such as "Peace."

Montstream's card business alone could become overwhelming, but she's determined to keep it in perspective — and leave time for her larger paintings. "I try not to spend more than one month of the year on the cards," she explains. "I'm usually done with the [new] line by February, and then I let the marketer and printers take over."

One perk of the card business is exposing her work to potential collectors. "A woman in New Jersey received a greeting card, then went online and bought two large pieces," Montstream says. But she likes the personal feedback, too: "One guy told me he proposed to his girlfriend with one of the cards."

Megan Humphrey, owner of the Burlington-based company Sweet Basil, came to card making through her love of romance and Valentine's Day. She says, "It's important to stop and acknowledge the people you care about at a different time of year . . . not just on a birthday."



DESIGNER: MEGAN HUMPHREY



DESIGNER: JESS GRAHAM



The stars are just the words we wish
The words are filled with Autumn glory
from the mountains

DESIGNER: JOHN CHURCHMAN

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by Mike Ives (09/05/07)...

Kirtan Call

Singing Kirtan with Krishna Das, First Unitarian Universalist Society, Burlington, September 20, 8 p.m. \$25/30.

by Matthew Walker (09/05/07)...

Lights, Camera... Action?

Ten years in the making — and remaking — Keith Spiegel's "Groupies" gets a new name and a release date

by Margot Harrison (08/29/07)...

Factory Fallout

Former employees reflect on an outsourced economy

by Mike Ives (08/29/07)...

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How Facebook spawned a maverick Ann Landers at Middlebury College

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All Stirred Up

A former Vermont college prez is leading a national campaign to lower the drinking age

by Paula Routly (08/22/07)...

Lost Love Story

Book review: A Peculiar Grace

by Margot Harrison (08/22/07)...

Humphrey, who has a day job in marketing at CCTV, has been making one-of-a-kind cards for more than 25 years. Her constructions look like miniature Victorian dioramas, but with more pizzazz. Each begins with a copy of a vintage postcard, which Humphrey attaches to cardstock. After assembling a batch of these, she adds a creative mix of beads, buttons, lace and other embellishments. She works on each card as if it were a tiny canvas, not stopping until she feels it's complete. These unique pieces retail for \$4.75.

Humphrey sometimes includes a greeting on the outside of a card, but she intentionally leaves the inside blank. When it comes to finding something heartfelt to say, "People have to do their own work," she suggests. "Besides, if I put a greeting in, it wouldn't be as good as what they would write themselves."

Humphrey has expanded her line from Valentine's to St. Patrick's Day cards, cards that highlight towns in Vermont and cards with animal themes. "Dogs are really big right now," she notes. But, like Montstream, Humphrey sells the most cards around the winter holidays.

Asked if she turns a profit on her intricate creations, Humphrey laughs. "I hope I do," she says. Currently her cards are in retail outlets in Vermont, Maine and Connecticut, and she participates in several annual craft shows. She'd like to expand but admits it's hard to find the time for marketing. For Humphrey, making cards is a labor of love, and she can't imagine giving it up. "I walk out to my studio, and it's like, 'Ahh,'" she says. "I start to crave it. It's an outlet for me and I really enjoy it."

Jess Graham of Wolcott, who's just starting out, feels the same way. She moved more than 500 cards in her first year on the art-card market. Graham paints unnaturally bright modern oil portraits of people and environments. She initially put copies of her paintings on cards to send to friends and family, since it was cheaper than buying ready-made ones. Then Graham realized there were a lot of people who liked her work and couldn't afford to purchase it, but could become collectors through her cards. She began selling them at two local coffee shops.

Though her profits so far provide just enough money to buy "ink cartridges and a six-pack," Graham is motivated to continue. "It's the idea of making money with my art," she says. "That's the dream job — to be eating a piece of cheese and say, 'I bought this cheese with my art.'"

Although she's been making cards for only a short time, Graham already knows what keeps the industry going: holidays. Her interpretations can be unorthodox. "People always laugh at me when I say these are my Christmas cards," she says. "I did one with a donkey on the beach with some boxes on its back, and one of women with boxes on their heads. The second one came from a dream of a coming apocalypse, where all I had to protect myself was a box to put over my head."

Don't worry; there are no premonitory visions spelled out in her cards — unless you want there to be. Graham prefers to let people interpret her work for themselves. She just wants to gain exposure for her art and to give people "a little joy and laughter; to have people get a little giggle."

For Essex photographer-designer JohnChurchman, cards are serious business. He sells a popular line through Brickhouse Studios, a home-based business he runs with his wife, Jennifer. Churchman's photographs are striking explorations of color, light and perspective as they play out on the canvas of Vermont. His cards pair these scenes with meaningful literary quotations. Churchman considers the card venture a return to his roots — more than 25 years ago, he graduated from Vassar with a degree in English. "I finally have a use for the poetry I



pbandj

I am a very nice person. If you treat me well I will treat you like a King. I love...

Browse...

[Women Seeking Men](#)

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[Men seeking Men](#)

[I Spy](#)



studied back in college!" he exclaims.

Churchman says he attempted to produce greeting cards years ago but couldn't make it work as a business. "The idea for the Brickhouse Studios line came about two and a half to three years ago, with my wife. The difference this time is that she is the driving force," he says. "It takes a lot of focus. Jennifer is very good at marketing and directing." The cards sell for \$2.95 apiece at hundreds of bookstores, stationers and art retailers around the country.

Some of Churchman's cards are tailored to birthdays, Christmas or other holidays; all of them come with customized sentiments. This time around, Churchman is committed. "I love it," he says of his card-making occupation. "It's like a puzzle. I go through hundreds of quotes before I find the right one." He pairs a fall foliage photo with a line from Albert Camus: "Autumn is a second spring when every leaf is a flower." A snowy winter-wonderland scene gets Lord Byron: "There is pleasure in the pathless woods."

Churchman finds the work rewarding on a more personal level, too. "There was a woman recovering from cancer who wrote me to say that my card comforted her," he says. "That's the part I truly like — that takes it from being a nice image to something that reverberates on a deeper level."

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Designer: Katharine Montstream

Card: Reproductions of her paintings

Retail price: \$2.25 for holiday cards, or 10 for \$10

Available at: Many locations, including these around Burlington: City Market, Kinko's, Creative Habitat at Ben Franklin, Scribbles, Paper Peddler, Gardener's Supply, Bennington Potters North, The Peace and Justice Center, and a self-service rack in the lobby of One Main Street

www.kmmstudio.com/Cards.htm

Designer: Megan Humphrey

Card: Mixed media on cardstock

Retail price: \$4.75

Available at: Many locations around Vermont, including Frog Hollow and Danforth Pewter in Burlington; Sweet Clover Market in Essex; To the Table in Essex Junction; The Floral Gallery in Williston; As the Crow Flies in St. Albans; Sweet William Cottage and Village Wine & Coffee in Shelburne

www.sweetbasilcards.com/cards.htm

Designer: Jess Graham

Card: Reproductions of her paintings

Retail price: \$3

Available at: Bee's Knees Coffee Shop in Morrisville; Stowe Coffeehouse

www.jessgrahamstudio.com

Designer: John Churchman

Card: Photographs with quotations

Retail price: \$2.95, or \$18 for 12

Available at: Many locations around Vermont, including Frog Hollow, Apple Mountain, Scribbles, HomePort and Spirit Dancer in Burlington; Vermont Gift Barn in South Burlington; The Floral Gallery in Williston; To the Table in Essex Junction; The Book Rack in Essex

www.brickhousstudios.com/galleries/card/index.htm

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