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Group W: Second Shift

Michael Krawitz, Special to The Eagle

In this photo taken before last year's event, FX Tobin works on his mural, 'Labor Day.'

Thursday, August 10 PITTSFIELD

"Love is lovelier the second time around," Frank Sinatra sang to us back in the '60s. The Pittsfield-based art cooperative, **Group W**, may have roughly the same idea in mind as they present their second annual group show, as a sequel to last July's "Night Shift." "Second Shift," opens on Saturday, Aug. 12, at 7 p.m. at East Coast Refinishing at 4 Industrial Drive, Pittsfield. **Group W**'s core is a group of friends from the 1968 graduating class at St. Joseph's High School, joined by ex-pat Pittsfielders and long-time craftsmen, but relatively recent converts to the arts, who gather every Wednesday night in the massive premises of the East Coast Refinishing building to apply their day-job skills to creative ends. In fact, the name "**Group W**" was coined by welder Mark Hanford, "the resident wizard of molten steel," as his colleagues respectfully refer to him, as an umbrella term for "Welding on Wednesdays," when he first began teaching the "artists" the skills needed for "Industrial Strength Art." At last year's debut exhibition, Hanford, 50-something, showed his first work of "art," composed of I-beams, welded steel tanks and flowing water.

With its 800 square-foot paint booth, East Coast Refinishing is "the largest surface refinishing company in western Massachusetts," according to Pete Melle, who with his wife, Claudia, in 1999 took over a formerly vacant building. A brown fields site for more than 10 years, the property was once used by Lipton Energy to fabricate enormous steel holding tanks. Today they refurbish huge industrial equipment as well as extra large art objects, such as 19th century cast-iron gates and other un-reproducible decorative metal structures from Cranwell and other still-standing examples of Berkshire County's glorious "iron age" past. These practical but still beautiful objects, many in various stages of reconstruction, will also be on display at the show.

Although considered a one-time only experience, last summer's multi-media event proved so successful and popular that **Group W** decided to do it again. "We had such a turnout last year," says Mike Clary, spokesperson for **Group W** and marketing director at Shakespeare & Company, and "we realized that art is a public interest. We want to show you have freedom to create art where you are, and that people consider freedom, and that artistic freedom is important to the culture."

Also returning to Pittsfield from California, where he works in the film industry as a director and assistant director is Larry Carroll, who will create a projection system, "unique to this building," says co-creator Mike Melle. What will it ultimately look like? "You'll have to be here to find out," we're told.

What's particularly important to residents and visitors to Berkshire County this year is that last year's enormous and adventurous creations are still on display, because they are literally part of the huge East Coast Refinishing building. Jay Tobin, a member of the founding group, and a Pittsfield Fire Department captain, created the original "Nightshift," a 10 by 20 foot fresco which has been compared to the work of Ellsworth Kelly. It still stands, ready for a second shift of admirers in 2006. FX Tobin, Bill's brother, created "Labor Days," an homage to the workers who built Pittsfield. This mural also remains as part of the 30-foot-walls of the 28,000 square foot building.

Perhaps the most striking work from 2005's "Nightshift" is long time Pittsfield High School teacher and coach Bill Tobin's massive gargoyle, which now hangs above the front entrance to East Coast Refinishing as a permanent reminder of the commerce and art which takes place within. This year's featured attraction is Michael Melle's "Star Shooter," a mythical cement-over-steel-frame sculpture. Be ready, kids. It's really BIG!

» If you go ... An opening reception for **Group W**'s "Second Shift" will be held Saturday, Aug. 12, from 7 p.m. to midnight. A viewing will also be held Sunday, Aug. 13, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. East Coast Refinishing is located at 4 Industrial Drive in Pittsfield. For more information, call (413) 499-9348 or visit www.culturalpittsfield.com or www.groupwnightshift.com.

Group W has had some ripple effects in the community. The Lichtenstein Gallery in Pittsfield has been showing and selling some of their work since Aug. 4, and on a recent Wednesday night most of the artists and their wives were gathered around a "grill in development," fashioned by Becket's Keith Tremblay, a member of the maintenance staff at Canyon Ranch, from one of that institution's discarded olive oil drums. Is it art? Is it commerce? We do know it was created under the auspices of **Group W** on the premises of East Coast Refinishing in Pittsfield.

[Photo: Mike Melle's cement-over-steel-frame sculpture 'Star Shooter' — shown in progress at East Coast Refinishing — will be ready for the show. It is approximately 9 feet tall.<P>](#)