



# A work of *Art*

Gallery  
blends  
intrigue and  
sophistication  
without  
forgetting  
how to  
have fun

By Diana Bean  
GOODLIFE

On a cold and snow-dusted Saturday evening, men in dark suits and women in cocktail dresses and heels make their way up the steel-grated ramp to the loading dock doors of the former cigar factory. They move past the velvet rope and into the freight elevator, which churns up to the fourth floor. The doors part, the passengers step out and suddenly it's clear that they're somewhere not like anywhere else in Binghamton.

“Hello, hello!” Ronald Wells sweeps toward his guests, greeting them with hugs and kisses. He has a big voice and a big personality. He is exuberant and energetic. He is a rush of adrenaline.

Behind him is Richard Laing Jr., the evening's other host. His All-American looks and meas-

A space as big as the Wells Laing Gallery can intimidate some artists, Ronald Wells says. But Jordan Eagles enjoyed almost a mini-retrospective, showing works ranging from early pieces to some that he had finished just before his May 2008 opening.

ured demeanor make him the yin to Wells' yang. Together they are business partners in Wells Laing Gallery, a private gallery for contemporary art on the top floor of a brick building. It's an oasis of sophistication in a not-at-all tony section of town.

And tonight is opening night for an exclusive collection of sculpture.

## Industry meets art

The idea for Wells Laing Gallery was sparked by a sandblasting project.

Wells, 39, studied at FIT and owns Wells and Company, specializing in 20th century art and

design. Laing, 40, studied management and is vice president of the family business, Laing Industries, a heavy duty truck and trailer repair facility. Both were raised in Broome County.

The two men were just acquaintances when Wells tapped Laing for his expertise in helping clean up some metal items Wells had stored.

"We were wandering through, collecting some of the pieces he wanted sandblasted," Laing says, "and lo and behold we entered this room filled with junk ... and I think we both had one of those moments of inspiration: 'Wow, this is a great space.'"

At the time, Wells was looking for a bigger and better gallery space. Laing thought it was time to further indulge his passion for art and architecture.

"We kind of jumped in with both feet," Laing says. "I don't come from the same background Ronald does, but I've learned a tremendous amount from him, and also I do bring past experience with my business."

"We have a singular passion for art and design," Wells says.

"His number is still in my phone under 'sand blast.'"

### Sheetrock to champagne

In less than a year, the two turned the 3,000-square-foot exhibition space from cavern into canvas: room enough to show an artist's oeuvre, but in an atmosphere that feels more intimate than industrial.

They did most of the renovation themselves, devoting nights and weekends to everything from laying the cherry floor (it's finished with a custom-made jet-black stain), to installing all the lighting.

The centerpiece of the room



Provided  
Large sculptures, flanked by smaller models, are artfully displayed in a bed of white gravel in the Wells Laing Gallery in Binghamton. The works of the late sculptor Gerald DiGiusto were presented in a Zen garden theme. The DiGiusto show opened in November 2008.

"There had been nothing here for years. It was the true blank canvas in the middle of nowhere. Kind of like 'build it and they will come.' And sure enough, I love being here."

RONALD WELLS



Rebecca Catlett

These pieces, by the late sculptor Gerald DiGiusto, had been stored since his death in 1987. The Wells Laing Gallery unveiled them in November 2008 and has since taken them to shows elsewhere in the country. Read about DiGiusto at [www.wellslaing.com](http://www.wellslaing.com).

is the Italian chandelier — 650 pounds of Lucite and one of only 10 made. Wells bought it at a tag sale at a home in Chatham, Mass.

The gallery opened in November 2007 with a show by Paul Hunter of New York City, who does luminous landscape paintings on gold and metal leaf. And in what has become the owners' signature style, it was an opening of grand proportions. In the long, stylized hallway outside the exhibition space, a by-invitation-only crowd was treated to Veuve Clicquot champagne, imported vodkas and elegant hors d'oeuvres — chocolate-covered rose petals

and gilded truffles. At the appointed hour, two massive gray industrial doors were pulled open to reveal the art the guests had come to see.

"Pleasurable, a spectacle and glamorous," is how artist Marc Dennis described a recent opening. "Both Ronald and Richard had told me they like to offer their audience a real aesthetic experience, and it's exactly that," he says.

### It's business, with a twist

Finding the right artist for the gallery is part business decision, part chemistry, Wells and Laing say. But it starts with the art.

"The first connection is with



Rebecca Catlett

Richard Laing Jr., left, and business partner Ronald Wells were both raised in Broome County. "It feels good to have this [the gallery] here in this community because I have roots and people know me," Laing says. "We could have opened the gallery anywhere," Wells says. "I'm so happy we did it here."

the visual, and then we have to connect with the artists themselves, and it has to be on every level because they're going to be like family in the long run," Wells says.

"We've chosen these artists, and we haven't chosen them on a whim," Laing says. "We've traveled to see their work, we've met them, we've been to their studios, we've fallen in love with what we've seen. We're not just on a shopping spree for art."

"If we don't love it, it's not happening," Wells is emphatic.

Of course, there are clients to consider.

"We're very cautious, we look at the art market, we look at what's happening, very carefully look at the artist," Wells says. "We're only interested in having clients 10, 15, 20 years from now be happy with their investments."

Jordan Eagles of New York City, who works in cattle blood and acrylic resin, was the second artist to show in the gallery.

His initial reaction was, "Binghamton? I want to see what you boys can do!" The result: The seven pieces in the preview show of his work sold out months before the show's official opening in May 2008.

The gallery is gorgeous, Eagles says.

"They have this really great taste in modern furniture, and they combine it with contemporary art. Often a solo exhibition is just my work," he says. "This time my work is in with this massive chandelier



Rebecca Catlett

Above: The Wells Laing Gallery specializes in contemporary art. Wells and Company is a separate entity specializing in 20th century modern art and design. The painting on the wall is by Paul Hunter. In the foreground are handmade Italian Memphis steel and leather dining chairs. There are six in the set.



Provided

Painter Marc Dennis' marigolds will be included in the next show. The flower on the right (these are actually separate paintings) has a roadmap of Machu Picchu snaking through the center.

## Visit Wells Laing

Wells Laing Gallery is on the top floor of an industrial building at 6 Emma St., Binghamton.

The next show opens Feb. 28, featuring paintings by Marc Dennis. Opening parties are by invitation only for clients or potential clients. The guest list is fluid and changes to accommodate those interested in a particular artist. The public is welcome to see the Dennis show from noon to 4 p.m. March 7, 14 and 21 or by appointment.

For more about the gallery and its artists, visit [www.wellslaing.com](http://www.wellslaing.com).

To see a catalog of Wells' 20th century modern art and design pieces, visit [www.wellsandcompanymodernism.com](http://www.wellsandcompanymodernism.com).

### Marc Dennis lecture

On April 18, Dennis will speak on clandestine artwork made by prisoners in concentration camps in World War II. The free event will be at the gallery. For an exact time and to reserve a spot, visit [www.wellslaing.com](http://www.wellslaing.com).

and antique furniture. Museum-quality furniture mixed with contemporary art is unique."

In the end, Laing says, "We outsold Atlanta, out-sold New York shows, because they can only hold a certain number of pieces."

### Beauty and the business

After an opening, Wells Laing takes the art on the road to shows around the country, so there are clients in Chicago, Miami, Baltimore and New York City. But the majority of the artwork has been sold locally, the gallery owners say.

"The average going price

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Provided

Coleoptera Venus, 2009, oil on canvas mounted on panel, 9 x 11 inches

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is \$8,000, and people do not wince," Wells says.

Abstract paintings in blood sold well, but will realistic paintings of bugs connect with buyers?

Wells and Laing will find out when Marc Dennis opens his show on Feb. 28. Dennis paints flowers, people and birds – but it is the unexpected images that command the most attention: sides of beef hanging in a meat locker and bugs pinned to specimen trays.

He's not alone in finding beauty in all truths of nature.

"The beetles sell better than anything I've ever painted in my life," Dennis says. His two meat locker paintings have sold; a third may be ready for

his show.

"I've learned that people who buy the insects have the same aesthetic appreciation for all art. What they're looking for in the experience is an appreciation of the odd side of life, the odd side of nature, for the thing that is not pristine."

And that gets to the heart of buying

art, the gallery owners say.

"We're not saying buy this as an investment," Laing says. "We're saying buy it because you love it."

"Some buyers are fearless; they'll buy immediately. Some take weeks to decide. Either way, it comes down to an emotional commitment."

RONALD WELLS

## NEXT UP: MARC DENNIS

Marc Dennis of Ithaca is an artist, an entomologist, a professor and a historian.

While his paintings have a photograph-like quality, he is not a photorealist. His style is called hyper-realism because he plays with perspective and focus.

He also plays with our sensibilities.

Things that make some people squirm are the very things he is drawn to paint: raw meat, dead wasps, bugs impaled by pins on specimen trays. "I can find beauty in most things," he says. "I really love painting dead wasps and beetles."

Dennis is not alone; his paintings of insects speak to people who share his appreciation of the inherent beauty of the natural world — right down to the sheen of the beetle's shell and the way the wasp curls into itself in death.

The artist has always been a student of nature, but the wasp paintings have a "psychological disquiet" to them. Spread out on a white surface, the insects reminded him of dead soldiers on a battlefield. "I wasn't appreciative of us going into Iraq, and when I looked at the wasps I thought of the war."

"Everyone who saw them wanted one," he says.

Dennis also paints birds and flowers and portraits. But take a closer look at the bird



Provided

**Jesus Holding Jumping Mouse, oil on canvas, by Marc Dennis. Bugs, birds and animals are among the subjects that beguile Dennis, who will be showing his works at Wells Laing Gallery starting Feb. 28.**

being held in the man's hand; is it being caressed or captured? And those daisies: They're uniquely imperfect — with little funguses and twitches and glitches, as he calls them — and no less beautiful. It's just not the typical take on beauty, he says.

Dennis, who moved from Brooklyn to Ithaca several years ago, is represented by

galleries in Chicago, Seattle and, in New York, by Hirschl & Adler Modern. In the Southern Tier, his works have been in smaller group shows, but he calls his solo show at Wells Laing a welcome opportunity to exhibit his art in a place where he feels at home.

"Being here, I've come to respect the art and the people. I want them to know how I've been inspired by being here."

"When they told me they wanted to represent me in this region I thought, what an exciting opportunity. I needed an exciting, dynamic, serious venue here," he says.

Dennis, a professor at Elmira College, also is a Holocaust historian who researches and lectures on the clandestine art of prisoners in concentration camps in World War II. The prisoners who got their hands on paper and pencils or ink risked death. Most artists want to leave a trace of themselves behind, he says, and his research has led him to ask himself: "If I were imprisoned during this time, would I have made art?"

Dennis will offer a free lecture on this topic on April 18 at the Wells Laing Gallery. For details and to reserve a spot, visit [www.wellslaing.com](http://www.wellslaing.com).

For more about Dennis, visit [www.marcdennis.com](http://www.marcdennis.com)



Provided

**Arbours Giganticus Vulgaris, oil on canvas, 2007, 40 x 50 inches**



Provided

**Artist Marc Dennis in his Elmira studio standing in front of one of his more recent large paintings of pinned wasps taken from photographs Dennis took while studying the collection at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.**