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Phil Romano, JD Miller plan Dragon Street gallery

Popular restaurateur says art venue will 'make Dallas famous'

Dallas Business Journal - by [Katherine Cromer Brock](#) Staff writer

Phil Romano has spent decades building a multibillion-dollar restaurant empire.

He's the founder of Fuddrucker's, Romano's Macaroni Grill, Cozymel's and EatZi's Market & Bakery, among other successful ventures. But the CEO is entering what he hopes will be his "most fun career."

Romano has teamed with Dallas-based artist JD Miller to open the Samuel Lynne Galleries in mid-September. The 11,000-square-foot gallery at 1105 Dragon St. will replace Miller's existing Reflection Fine Art Gallery in Uptown, and herald the continuing explosion of Dragon Street as the newest Dallas arts mecca.

"This is the gallery that's going to make Dallas famous," Romano boldly said as he walked through the dust-filled rehabbed warehouse space that was built in the early 1950s.

Renovation is continuing on the single-story building, which will include four separate gallery spaces and a small theater room for educational videos and speakers. Romano said by the time he's done, he'll put about \$2 million into the building, which has a market value of \$480,940, according to the Dallas Central Appraisal District's Web site.

The designer of the gallery, which derives its name from a combination of the names of Romano's son, Samuel, and Miller's daughter, Jaime Lynne, is Dallas-based Thomas Krahenbuhl.

A grand opening reception for the gallery is scheduled for Sept. 19, during which six other artists will have work on display.

"People in Dallas have historically gone to New York or Santa Fe to buy art," Miller said. "We want them to consider Dallas."

Miller, 54, began his career in the music industry as a guitar player and producer. But when he "found his voice," he turned to oil painting and is at the forefront of a new "reflectionist" movement, selling his three-dimensional oil paintings in galleries nationwide.

Romano, most noted for his restaurant dealings, said he has been painting for 40 years.

"My art makes me happy," he said, pulling his iPhone from his pocket and flipping through photos of his work. Most of his paintings are wall-sized canvases splashed with bright blocks and swirls of oil paint. He zooms in on the brushstrokes.

"I get productive when I'm not doing a restaurant — got to get my creative juices flowing," said Romano, 68. "I don't have time to become a great artist. I'm just going to be one."

Romano landed his first commission piece for a private residence in New York. The majority of money he makes from the sale of his art, he said, will go to Hunger Busters, the Dallas-based charity that provides food to the homeless. Romano began the charitable venture in the fall of 2000.

The unlikely business partners met only seven months ago at Romano's Nick & Sam's restaurant. Romano asked Miller's advice on opening an art gallery.

"He said, 'If you're going to do an art gallery, the place to be is on Dragon,'" Romano said. The building was purchased in April.

The new 'gallery row'

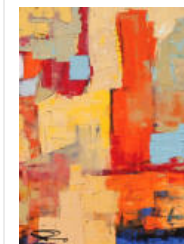
Over the past few years, the Dragon Street area in the Design District has become the new "gallery row."

According to the [Dallas Art Dealers Association's](#) Web site, DADA has three member galleries in North Dallas, five in Deep Ellum, six in Uptown and a handful of others scattered throughout the city.

There are 13 DADA-member galleries along Dragon Street and in the Design District.

Dragon is narrow and pocked with potholes. But the artist community has enthusiastically relocated into the old warehouses lining the street.

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“All the galleries used to be in Uptown,” said Ashley Tatum Casson, director of the Gerald Peters Gallery, another 11,000-square-foot space two doors down from Samuel Lynne. “That’s common. The rents go up, the artists move out.”

DADA Director Lisa Taylor said she has enjoyed watching the area blossom since the first gallery moved in about a decade ago. PanAmerican ArtProjects moved to the Design District from Turtle Creek.

“Their drop-by traffic has increased at least 50%,” Taylor said. “That’s a remarkable thing, to actually have face time with individuals.”

Taylor said the burgeoning art scene in the Design District is good for the artists, but she is torn about what it could mean for the city.

“I don’t want everyone to desert Uptown; we still have wonderful spaces there,” she said. “I’m filled with a little mixture of celebration for them, and sad for Uptown.”

Casson said she enjoys the Dragon Street location. Instead of viewing her new neighbors as competition for the serious buyers that now have an art destination, she welcomes the variety that the number of galleries brings.

“It shows strength in the arts,” she said. “I just hope Dallas patrons will sustain the artist community.”

Taylor said it is a tough time for art galleries. In the economic downturn, patrons and collectors simply aren’t making as many large discretionary purchases.

“There’s always going to be the private-investor type that he or she can write a check, and it doesn’t bother them at all. There are others for whom it’s a luxury,” Taylor said.

Romano said he’s not concerned about the economy. All he has to do, he said, is count the large construction cranes stretching over the city’s skyline.

“They’re building big buildings,” he said. “They’ve all got big walls. They’re going to need big art. And we’ve got it.”

Even though he’ll be displaying his more artistic side, fueled by emotion rather than the bottom line, Romano is still a businessman.

“It’s a retail business. There is a market, and a good product that people want to buy,” he said. “The proof will be if you’re selling art.”

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