

INSIDE THE P&H CAFÉ | CRUISING FOR BURGERS | ALICE BINGHAM'S LEGACY

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BOB LOEB
AND THE REBIRTH OF
OVERTON SQUARE



URBAN PIONEER

How Alice Bingham transformed Memphis from “a \$200 town” into a serious fine-art market.

by EILEEN TOWNSEND

TO HAVE AN ART SCENE, you really only need five people: an artist, a dealer, a critic, a collector, and a curator. You need an artist to make the work, a dealer to sell it, a critic to tell the public whether it is worth treasuring, a collector to treasure it, and a curator to preserve it and bring the work to public display.

This seems simple enough. But, as recently as 35 years ago, Memphis did not have a viable art scene, at least one not defined as such. The city did have a successful art academy, several established museums, and a host of deeply talented local artists such as Carroll Cloar, William Eggleston, Veda Reed, and Ted Faiers. It had a rich visual history and a cultural legacy that placed it in league with New York, New Orleans, Chicago, and Detroit.

What Memphis lacked, in the late 1970s, was a genuine private art gallery. Yes, there were bric-a-brac places that sold sporting prints and reproductions of works by the old European masters, but contemporary artists like Reed, Faiers, and even Carroll Cloar sold work haltingly out of their studios, or in bookshops and boutiques. Despite its growing economy, Memphis was known as a “\$200 town,” shorthand for a place where collectors were not willing to spend over \$200 on a work of art.

In 1978, a recently divorced former homemaker with no college degree and no work experience proposed opening just the kind of contemporary art gallery that Memphis was missing; one that would showcase the work of both local and national talent; one that would bring fresh opportunity to a visual-arts scene that was already burgeoning in the academic world. Friends and family, and everyone else she consulted told her plainly to forget about it.

But Alice Bingham didn't forget about it. Then in her late 30s, she was in a unique, and — for others who shook more easily than she did — somewhat unfortunate situation. Yes, Bingham had all the traditional advantages of a fortunately born Southern woman. (She was a Condon by birth, whose family started the Conwood Corporation.) She was charismatic, beautiful, and well-connected, but, by virtue of her background, had been sheltered from the working world by her marriage and privilege. In 1978, she needed a job.

She also loved art, and was intuitively smart about it. She knew that nowhere in Memphis could you buy graphic

works such as lithographs, etchings, silkscreens, or posters, but that there was a potential market for prints by living, working artists. Bingham felt that hesitant collectors who might not be ready to spend \$10,000 on a new work would feel more open to buying prints. A graphics gallery might be the right business to push the city out of its tired bearings and into something entirely new. Despite the best attempts of her friends to dissuade her, Bingham would not take no for an answer.

In order to get Alice Bingham Graphics, as the gallery would be called in its earliest incarnation, off the ground, Bingham needed two things: She needed help, and she needed a loan. To get the \$5,000 she estimated she would need to start out (“It sounded like a fortune to me,” she recalls), she asked for a loan from the National Bank of Commerce, telling them of her intention to take the money to New York City and buy prints. The bank was hesitant, but after some convincing, Bingham secured the loan. She was soon able to hire Murphy Watson, a young Southwestern (now Rhodes College) graduate with a degree in art history.

“My first New York trip for the gallery was a high/low event,” Alice recalls in notes that she later wrote about her early years. She has recently collected those notes and memories, and shares them with me as we sit on the patio of Lunchbox Eats in downtown Memphis on a lovely October afternoon. Bingham is visiting old friends in Memphis, heading south from her home in Maine to her winter residence at Boca Grande, Florida. She speaks energetically and with humor. The years have affected neither her charisma nor her beauty.

She remembers spending hours painstakingly poring over prints at a New York gallery. When the gallerist asked her what she was doing, and Bingham responded that she intended to buy prints for a completely new art gallery, the gallerist advised: “Buy what you like. If you're good, it'll sell. If you're not, you shouldn't be in the business anyway.”



A photograph from 1983 shows Alice Bingham with works from sculptor John McIntire (LEFT) and painter Veda Reed, two of the many local artists she represented.

Alice Bingham Gallery

Bingham purchased prints by the pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, a lithograph by Fairfield Porter, and a Jack Beal linoleum-block print, along with other contemporary and recognizable pieces. When she returned to Memphis, stocked up with prints, she and Murfy Watson got to work organizing the future gallery. "I would go out to her house," Watson remembers. "We would spread out everything on the floor in her bedroom and create index cards with names of people we thought might be interested. She was flying by the seat of her pants, and I was flying by the seat of my pants."

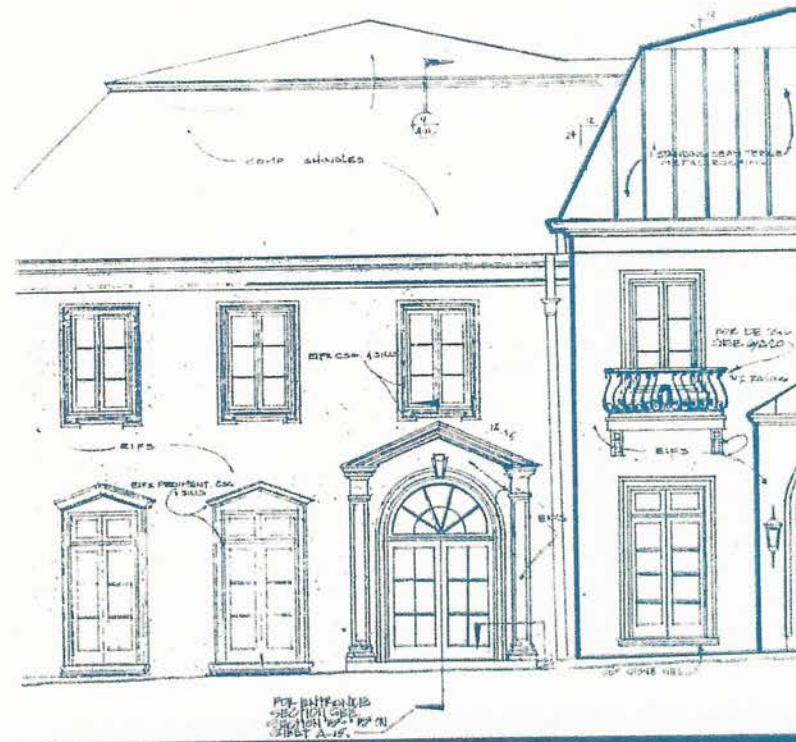
The first show held under the auspices of Alice Bingham Graphics took place in Bingham's home, on Yates Road, in the spring of 1979. The exhibition was of Memphis artist and longtime Memphis Art Academy professor Edward "Ted" Faiers' prints. Ted Faiers is remembered best for his vibrant figures and colorfully modulated abstractions influenced by early twentieth-century masters like Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. His prints are less colorful than his paintings, but there is a generous quality to his line work, a quality that Bingham (who seems to have always had a preference for the daring and the colorful) perhaps found inspiring.

Bingham had no plans to work out of her home for long, especially when Memphis' entertainment and shopping districts were growing busier. By October 1979, Alice had found a home for her gallery in a small, brick building on Cooper Avenue; the space had formerly been a hardware store and an architectural fixture and tiles shop. (It currently houses Restaurant Bari.) Thanks to the passage of a "liquor by the drink" law in 1969, Overton Square had seen new bars and restaurants opening regularly; spots like TGI Fridays, Bombay Bicycle Club, and Yosemite Sam's were drawing young people from around the city. Memphis was slowly emerging from a decade-long period of depression and turmoil, following the King assassination, and a new generation of Memphians were more than willing to shake off the residual Seventies gloom.

Bingham quickly filled the brick-walled space with print bins and storage cabinets, attempting to create a feeling of "easy access" to the work. Soon, Alice Bingham Graphics was hosting regular openings and drawing crowds. Murfy Watson remembers, "Overton Square was where you went. Alice threw a great party when she had her openings. A lot of people came and enjoyed coming to Midtown for that."

Meanwhile, Bingham found work not only as a gallerist, but as an art consultant. Corporate Memphis was on the rise; AutoZone, FedEx, First Tennessee Bank, Morgan Keegan, and Holiday Inn were all growing in the city, and, as these businesses grew, company leaders showed a new willingness to invest in art for their workspaces. Around this time, "corporate art" became a buzzword across the country, and, correspondingly, corporate art consultants were designated to expand these collections.

In a later newsletter from Alice Bingham Gallery, Alice wrote about corporate-art collecting, perhaps trying to separate her practice from that of others: "I have never been interested in selling art as an investment. To encourage buying art for storage is not helpful to the artist and provokes greed rather than enjoyment in the collector. I am interested in working with collectors, whether private or corporate, to seek out the particular artists and works of art which will most enrich their lives and will maintain a proper value over time."



From its beginnings in a former hardware store, by 1988 the Alice Bingham Gallery had grown so much that it moved into larger quarters on White Station.

In 1979, Ron Terry, the head of First Tennessee Bank, hired Bingham to help build an art collection that reflected and taught about the true spirit of Tennessee. For this "Heritage Collection" project, Bingham travelled often, to galleries and homes and art fairs across the country, sourcing works such as an 1839 engraving of Davy Crockett and a carved wooden sculpture of Phoebe Omlie, the Memphis-born aviation pioneer.

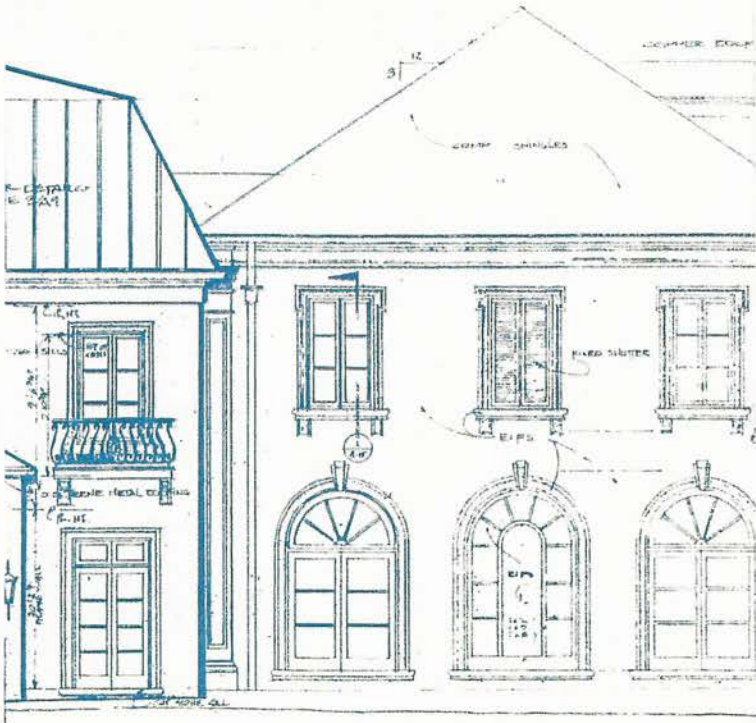
Bingham also recommended artists for commissions. She spent time traveling with photographer William Eggleston, who was commissioned to photograph important sites throughout the state. She embraced the work, and the travel, with characteristic curiosity, and a gung-ho spirit.

"I followed [Eggleston] everywhere he went, with my camera," Bingham recalls, "and I took pictures of what he was taking pictures of, and I can tell you that they did not compare. He is brilliant. He was difficult to work with, but he really has an extraordinary eye."

Bingham played an integral role in securing for Ted Faiers his largest-ever commission, a 1,100-square-foot mural painted on 51 panels called the First Tennessee Heritage Mural to be located in the ground floor of First Tennessee's downtown headquarters. Though Faiers died in 1985, before he could complete the work, this is considered one of his greatest achievements as an artist. (The work was finished in 1987 by one of Faiers' students.)

In its early years, Alice Bingham Gallery survived by a thread. Every day, Bingham would visit the homes of clients, look at a "deluge" (as

Alice Bingham Gallery



she put it) of artists' slides, write newsletters to the gallery's supporters, and greet anyone who came in curiously from the street. She kept a roster of about 20 artists, most of whom were also full-time professors. She sold out shows and threw festive holiday parties that drew large crowds. It was just enough to keep the gallery afloat.

"Every time I just got so discouraged," she says, "something good would happen. People think when they walk in and see a sold-out exhibition, 'These people must be making money,' but that sold-out exhibition has been up for 30 days, and you will be lucky if, after paying your rent and insurance, you make any money. You have to be selling every day, not just one day."

Despite her doubts, Alice saw by the early 1980s what she had hoped would happen. People began to buy work. The artistic community became closer and more active. Corporations poured money into the local art scene. (First Tennessee alone established a series of grants that distributed around \$285,000 to performing and visual artists between 1979 and 1982.) *The Commercial Appeal* hired its first-ever art critic, Donald LaBadie, so now Memphis had two parts of the art scene it had formerly been missing: a critic and a dealer. LaBadie wrote many reviews of shows at Alice Bingham Gallery, but Alice remembers him best for once telling her, "You know what your problem is? You have too good of taste."

Bingham did have good taste, but what made her stand out as a gallerist was not so much her taste as her personal style. The now-iconic artist Dolph Smith, who was with Alice Bingham Gallery for

more than a decade, remembers her as a friend more than a hard-line gallerist. "Alice was very easy to be with," recalls Smith. "She didn't have that edginess of somebody running something. She was kind of a Southern lady and, you know, I think we have to appreciate that."

Friendliness and deep commitment to the work of her artists were not so much Bingham's decision as her personal inclination. Creating a contemporary art gallery from scratch in a small city could hardly be a faceless task, but Bingham is remembered by the community for her particular warmth. A friend of Bingham's from New York, a successful gallerist, once advised Bingham that "the artists you represent are not your friends. It is a financial arrangement." This surprised Bingham, because, in Memphis, all of the artists she represented were her friends. "You get to know people's integrity in a small city," she says. People are known in Memphis not only for what they do, but who they are."

A particularly fine 1983 black-and-white photo (see p. 97) shows Alice looking composed. She stands next to a sculpture by the artist John McIntire titled *Lovers*, a dark, abstract, Brancusi-inspired piece; and in front of Veda Reed's painting, *Winter In Overton Park*. She is dressed formally but not stiffly in a pinstripe shirt and black skirt, her hands casually in her pockets. She looks to the side of the camera, self-assured and focused, smiling slightly.

A review written around that same time by Donald LaBadie notes that Alice Bingham Gallery (she dropped the "Graphics" early on, after she began exhibiting paintings) had a new look: "The sales counter and print and poster bins, formerly something of a distraction, have been moved to a back room. There is now only open, uninterrupted space for the viewing of art." LaBadie uses this comment as an intro into a rave review of painter Veda Reed's Memphis-based landscapes; paintings that, he notes, were very different from some of her earlier work.

The change in scenery was not arbitrary. Bingham realized, in the process of installing Veda Reed's 1983 show, that "the real business of a contemporary gallery is 'to sell an artist,' to become a partner with the artist in the completion of his/her creative process. Seeing [Reed's] paintings without the confusion of anything else, I realized that I not only loved the work, but I cared deeply that Veda be given a proper professional space for her exhibition."

Memphis allowed Bingham a flexibility to experiment with the gallery, and she likewise encouraged the artists she represented to experiment and change. "She didn't try to direct us," Dolph Smith remembers. "[After] my early career as a watercolor painter doing the kind of pastoral things I did early, I changed. I widened. Veda Reed and Burton Callicott went deep. They went deep and I went wide, and she dealt with that. She tried to take that and work with it, and that was supportive. Other people kind of wanted you to go a certain way."

David Lusk, whose eponymous gallery now supports the work of many of the same artists Alice Bingham Gallery did and who spent several years early in his career working for Bingham, has this to say about his mentor: "I think what I admire about her is her interest in people and in individuals. That was her sales technique. She wasn't pushing for anything ever, it was much more 'do you like this, and why do you like this?', not just shooting information out of her mouth." He also recalls Bingham's charisma: "She could instantly talk to almost anybody, and talk warmly, as if she was your best friend.

When she comes in, she lights up a room ... and she was not a blowhard. What she was saying always came from her heart."

The mid-Eighties were a time of professional growth for Alice Bingham Gallery, but a time of personal tragedy for Bingham herself. In 1985, her second husband, Jack Patterson, committed suicide; that same year, Bingham's mentor and friend Ted Faiers died unexpectedly from a heart attack at the age of 77. Despite these tremendous losses in her personal life, Bingham managed to keep the gallery going. Years later, she spoke to *The Commercial Appeal* about both the troubles and the value of those years, telling the paper that, "I wouldn't give anything in the world for the last 10 years, but I wouldn't like to do it again."

In 1986, Bingham partnered with another gallerist to create Schmidt-Bingham Gallery in New York. The Memphis sculptor Carroll Todd created beautiful wooden doors for the gallery, and many Memphis artists showed there in group exhibitions. Carroll Cloar had a successful solo show in the space. Jeff Nesin, a long-time friend of Alice's who served as president of Memphis College of Art for 19 years and whose hometown is New York, recalls Carroll Todd's doors as a stunning entry point. "Schmidt-Bingham Gallery was right in the heart of the art district at that time. So you get off the elevator in her building and you walk towards the gallery and the first thing that you encounter in New York, New York, was a big set of doors created by Carroll Todd, the wonderful Memphis sculptor."

Though Schmidt-Bingham did not offer Bingham the same freedom she felt in Memphis, Nesin suggests that "she was happy and proud to extend the reach of the people she had nurtured and supported in Memphis up here to the center of the world art scene. It was a terrific effort. They [Schmidt-Bingham] represented a lot of artists, and they were a serious and valid New York City Gallery for as long as they were open."

Meanwhile, Alice Bingham Gallery in Memphis had grown exponentially. It employed three art consultants, a curator, and a business manager, and held over 5,000 pieces of art on the premises. The record of the Gallery's shows is long and varied (and includes gems such as "10 by 10," an exhibition for which 10 artists made work under 10 inches, or "100% Cotton," an exhibition of experimental paper makers.) The



PHIS, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14, 1989

THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

In 1989, Alice Bingham was featured in a *Commercial Appeal* article about memorable holiday gifts; she's shown in her gallery with the crockpot given to her ten years before by her son, Tif.


newsletters from the period are especially revealing. In her gallery newsletters, Alice editorializes, writing with authority about her motivations for her work:

"Contrary to many contemporary art standards, I do believe that the production of art must be skillful. The skill, however, should be in such balance that it become inherent like the foundation of a building. Primarily, there must be a personal vision — justifiably significant and of an imperative nature (i.e. 'commanded from within'). And, finally, it must bear that universality and timelessness which connects all human experience."

In 1988, in response to changing currents in the Memphis scene, Bingham moved Alice Bingham Gallery to East Memphis, to a new location on White Station Road. Shortly thereafter, *The Commercial Appeal* ran an article about Bingham's work in her new space. A picture accompanying the article shows Bingham with a short, no-nonsense haircut. She is beaming. She wears a simple black shirt and a string of pearls, and sits in a chair surrounded by the paintings of Will Barnet and the drawings of Ted Faiers. The paintings and drawings had been selected to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the gallery.

Bingham would not remain active in Memphis a whole lot longer. By this time, there were fresh faces in the Memphis gallery scene who were assuming responsibility for selling artists' work. In 1990, Bingham partnered with gallerist Lisa Kurts, who was assisted by David Lusk; together, they formed Bingham-Kurts Gallery. In 1992, Alice remarried Aubrey Gorman, and moved to Maine to be with her husband. He passed away in 2002.

Since then, she has maintained her residence in Maine, as well as her home in Boca Grande, although she does visit Memphis regularly. Her real legacy, however, remains in the vitality of Memphis' current art scene. In a city that, outside of the art academy, offered few ways for contemporary artists to survive, Bingham was directly responsible for creating a community and an economy.

David Lusk sums it up: "Alice helped support a lot of people. She had a huge amount of impact in the way artists could live, and that is admirable." 

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