

New process by Hill firm turns photos into high art

by JEROME O'NEILL

Susan Beard is a successful entrepreneur in Chestnut Hill with a passion for mixing business and fine art. She owns and operates Susan Beard Design, located at 5 E. Highland Ave., and provides the community with professional photography services. Beard has always been interested in helping young artists succeed, and a meeting with local artist and photographer Leah Macdonald led to the recent creation of WaxWorks.

"After college in California, I wanted to move closer to my parents," said Macdonald, 36, originally from King of Prussia. "I came back in 1999 and joined Artforms gallery in Manayunk, which at the time shared studio space with Susan."

Macdonald graduated from California College of Arts in Oakland. Shortly after returning, she began working at the gallery in Manayunk. Joan Shrager of Artforms recognized the talent in the young artist and introduced her to Beard.

Macdonald has created a process that blends photography, beeswax and oil painting to produce stunning pieces of fine art. Every photograph that goes through this six-week process is transformed into a one-of-a-kind piece of art. They have the look of photos taken many years ago.

Once the process was perfected, Beard and Macdonald teamed with Julia Lehman-McTigue, a professional photographer for over 10 years, and formed WaxWorks. For the kickoff of WaxWorks, the local team got a booth in the main room at the Wedding & Portrait Photographers International (WPPI), the largest convention of its kind held in Las Vegas annually in late March. Beard chose the biggest and best convention to introduce WaxWorks to the art world.

"Over 40 studios signed on, and



Susan Beard (right), owner of Susan Beard Design, 5 E. Highland Ave., and photographer Leah Macdonald stand in front of photos created with their WaxWorks process. (Photo by Jerome O'Neill)

we had specific interest from people in China and Australia who want to bring the method overseas," said Beard (who would not reveal her age). "Photographers want it because it's unique."

A key element in this process is the starting point. The waxing process can be done with any photograph. WaxWorks takes the image, blows it up and creates the final product. Thus, amateur photographers can turn their most sentimental pictures into works of art.

"The process embellishes and softens the photograph," explained Macdonald. "There's a very hand-crafted feeling. The final piece has a seductive surface that's slightly colored and slightly veils the imagery."

The end result places the image somewhere between the realms of photography and painting. Beard has put together an e-commerce site, www.waxworksphoto.com, that makes it easy for a customer to maneuver and order. The site also contains a gallery of waxed pieces.

Macdonald's husband Duncan, 44, is an artist who designs custom motorcycles in Manayunk. They have two boys, Ace, 8, and Rory, 4.

Macdonald's work is also exhibited by Rodger LaPelle at his gallery on 3rd Street in center city.

Beard grew up in Chestnut Hill and enjoys traveling frequently to meet art communities throughout the world. "I love it here," declared Beard, who graduated from Moore College of Art. "I grew up on Rex Avenue and have always been in business for myself. As an entrepreneur, I've always felt that if you have a good idea, just do it."

That attitude and a connection with Bruce Robertson at Robertson's Flowers enabled Beard to establish Susan Beard Design four years ago in Chestnut Hill.

For more information, call 215-499-7649.

