



Mike Sturk, Calgary Herald

Tamar, left, and her mother Helen Zenith have opened a new gallery called Newzones.

Mother-daughter team build their own dream

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CALGARY HERALD

With tenacity, optimism and a unique partnership, Helen and Tamar Zenith have realized their dream. On Thursday, the mother-daughter team will open the doors of Newzones Gallery of Contemporary Art in a new building at 730 11th Ave. S.W. When it was time to move the five-year-old gallery closer to downtown, they decided to build from scratch and they have yielded to nothing to make it happen.

Not even Helen's health. The pair learned, just days before the gallery's construction was to begin, that Helen had a hole in her heart which had to be surgically repaired.

"They say I'm one of the quickest to recover," beams the resilient art dealer, tugging at her blouse to reveal part of the scar from the open-heart surgery she had just over three weeks ago.

"I'm just an optimistic person," she exclaims.

The cost of building seemed like a lofty prospect, but not when it was compared to the cost of renting in the area, which they chose for its proximity to the restaurants, shops and neighboring galleries that are transforming the west end of Calgary's Electric Avenue strip on 11th.

"There are so many spaces available but the absentee landlords won't budge (on the rents)," says Helen.

"For the prices they were asking, it

seemed worthwhile to just build our own."

The Zeniths settled on a spot, the former parking lot between Heavens and Paul Kuhn Gallery, and purchased it, before Calgary's recent economic surge, for what they describe as a "good" price.

Then they retained an architect friend, Peter Lawrence Wood, to design the gallery with their budget limitations in mind. He incorporated straight lines, clean white walls, pine trim, concrete floors and steel door and window framing to create an inviting and open-aired space.

The layout permits visitors to catch a glimpse of displays in neighboring rooms from almost anywhere in the gallery.

Helen, a 50-year-old artist, opened the first Newzones gallery in a business partnership with Tamar, 27, in a steel factory warehouse at an industrial site in the city's southeast.

Although the gallery's quarters at the Old Dominion Bridge site were cramped, crude and difficult to find, Newzones took off none-the-less.

"We worked very hard promoting ourselves," says Tamar, who is well-versed in art and also has a degree in commerce. She conducts most of the gallery's business.

"I don't even know how to use a computer," confesses Helen.

The Zenith's contacts with art dealers in the United States, where they are regulars at the Seattle Art Fair, have proved fruitful. The pair is able to secure paintings and prints by leading artists, such as American painter Ross Bleckner.

In a strategic move to showcase Canadian artists of similar styles, they have hung a silkscreen by Bleckner in their works on paper gallery alongside works by Canadian abstract artists including Christopher Kier and Cathy Daley.

"In the U.S., when an artist takes off, they really take off. Their art becomes worth a lot," says Helen.

"If we give a view of Canadian art next to a very successful international artist, we see that the Canadian artist stands up."

The Zeniths plan to keep a stable of 26 artists who will show their works on a regular basis. The gallery program also will be augmented with exhibitions by guest artists.

The Zeniths' aim is to illuminate the quality of work produced by domestic artists who haven't yet achieved international recognition, but who they believe are worthy of more attention.

The quiet celebration of domestic art bodes well for consumers.

Works at Newzones sell for between \$1,000 and \$8,000 and, at Tamar's insistence, there is a payment plan for beginning collectors with which she hopes to attract younger connoisseurs.

"I'm trying to get my friends interested in art," she says.

"A lot of them think that this (job) is really glamorous, but it's not. I don't own a Chanel suit. . . . We work 19-hour days, sometimes. It's more of a technical job, I would say.

"We do it because we love it," she adds. "If you really want something, you have to work for it. But you can get it."