



# GUARDIANS OF MILWAUKEE ART

**Menomonee Valley warehouse becomes a holding place and gallery for visual art**

BY DAVID LUHRSEN

**S**ome collectors will winnow their holdings to make room for more items or to upgrade their collection. For art collectors John Shannon and Jan Serr, upgrading was beside the point; they bought for love, not investment. With more than 3,600 artworks—from Henri Matisse through David Hockney and contemporary artists from around the world—and no place to display or safely store the entire collection, the couple developed a business, Guardian Fine Art Services (1635 W. St. Paul St.), in a five-story building constructed in 1924. Aside from housing Shannon-Serr’s artwork, Guardian rents space to other collectors, providing a secure environment for irreplaceable items.

The public face of the venture, called The Warehouse, is a gallery and performance space on the building’s ground floor. A circa-1900 painted wood carving of the Hindu god Hanuman greets visitors with outstretched palms. He’s an appropriate marker for The Warehouse’s current exhibition, “Jan Serr: A Painter’s Photographs of India” (through Dec. 13). A student of the late Milwaukee painter Schomer Lichtner (think whimsical cows), Serr’s paintings and prints have been hung in galleries across North America. “A Painter’s Photographs” is her first photography exhibition but not The Warehouse’s first show. The Warehouse has displayed art from the Shannon-Serr collection and mounted, earlier this year, “On Belonging”—a collaboration between Milwaukee photographers-videographers Lois Bielefeld and Nirmal Raja, along with dance performances by Wild Space and Maria Gillespie. Adjacent ground-floor rooms have been used for theater readings and community meetings.

“A Painter’s Photographs of India” is a meaningful and visually dazzling body of work taken by Serr while traveling the subcontinent with a point-and-shoot camera. The technology allowed her to wait, inconspicuously and patiently, for a telling moment to appear. In *Sacred Cow Cart*, that moment involved a pair of men in Western clothes on a motorcycle zipping past a traditionally garbed farmer riding behind a pair of white cows with blue painted horns. Washday, as the work had

been done for millennia, occurs on the left hand of *Woman in Stream*; much of the photo concerns the fleetingly impressionistic play of sunlight on rippling water.

Work is featured in several photographs. In *Ironing*, a man labors at a long table with an old-fashioned steam iron, a stack of clean and pressed linens at his side. Serr’s formal composition shows unflinching vision. The subject of *Monk with Bell* walks forward through a pillared Buddhist shrine toward blinding white light—a sunny portal or a glimpse of infinity? *Exotic Market* comes closest to making an explicit social statement with its billboard—smiling Anglo faces, pristine condos and the message of “Living in Luxury”—looming over a bustling but impoverished “Exotic Market” on a gritty street corner.

## High-Security Zone

Aside from the spacious Warehouse gallery, the building’s remaining 61,000 square feet is devoted to Guardian Fine Art Services. The facility houses the bulk of the Shannon-Serr collection and provides state-of-the-art storage for private collectors and institutions, including the Museum of Wisconsin Art (MOWA). “Confidentiality is something we provide our clients,” says Shannon. The soft-spoken entrepreneur adds, “We visited facilities on the East Coast, the West Coast and Chicago to learn best practices.”

The Guardian building is a fortress with bank-grade security alarms and cameras trained on the parking lot and on St. Paul Street. The loading dock is TSA-approved; only Guardian employees with favorable FBI background checks can enter the room where crates and boxes are prepared, allowing the shipments to bypass normal airport cargo handling once they arrive at Mitchell International Airport. Among the many services Guardian provides clients is an art transportation truck with a two-man crew, alarms and tracking devices in case of trouble.

Climate control is essential in any state-of-the-art storage facility where temperature and humidity can be neither too high nor too low. Every 30 seconds, computers verify levels for the temperature and humidity inside Guardian’s storerooms. In case of power failure, a generator kicks in within half a minute. Inside the vaults, works on paper are kept in acid-free archival boxes. Paintings are hung on portable metal racks. Guardian also stores furniture, unloaded firearms and objects of all sorts in the same carefully maintained climate.

“We offer security, climate control, professional people and procedures,” Shannon says, adding, as a surety, “We store our art here.”

The Warehouse gallery is open 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays during Gallery Night and Day and by appointment. For more information, call 414-252-0677 or visit [thewarehousemke.org](http://thewarehousemke.org).

( l ) Installation view of “Jan Serr: A Painter’s Photographs of India” at The Warehouse  
( r ) Jan Serr, *Monk with Bell*, 2019, Inkjet print on aluminum