

Work of Art

BY JOANNA CORMAN

Kira Stewart's love for drawing and painting as a child carried into college, where she majored in fine art. After graduation, she took a job unrelated to her major, but after a decade, realized she hadn't painted once. She began re-training herself and in August 2006 opened Art Consulting Services, which allows her to use her expertise to help businesses outfit new buildings or existing offices with art.

Using an art consultant, Stewart says, is "the difference between getting something off the menu and having the chef make something special for you. ... If you're going to the trouble of working with art consultants, you should be getting something that is custom-tailored and created and designed and thoughtfully selected for your exact space, your wall, your business, the purpose of what you're doing."

Although most of Stewart's clients are in the health care industry in the Capital Region and the Bay Area, she also works with other businesses such as restaurants and financial firms. Her projects require the installation of a few pieces or hundreds, including commissioned original work, limited editions, framed posters and reproductions.

An art gallery can furnish art, but it only offers the artists it represents. Stewart keeps a growing database of hundreds of artists nationwide who offer a variety of prices and styles. Any type of art a client wants, she says she can find: sculpture, photography, glass, clay, oil paintings, watercolors, abstract work, figurative images or landscapes. When the exact piece is not available, she'll work with artists to create something new. Her clients' budgets range from a few hundred dollars to hundreds of thousands. Typically, Stewart



Kira Stewart, owner of Art Consulting Services, featured two artists at this building for Sutter Medical Foundation: Sacramento sculptor Kristen Hoard and muralist Kent Peterson.

says clients have a lot of options by spending between \$1 and \$3 a square foot.

Stewart, 46, has grown her business since launching it from her Orangevale home in 2006. Although she says her revenue figures are proprietary, in 2008 her company completed artwork for 32 sites and sold more than 1,200 pieces of art. Sales marked a 59 percent increase over the previous year. She has completed about 65 projects with her company.

The job requires a high degree of detail. To choose the right art, Stewart meets with clients to discuss vision, budget and the space. She and her two-person staff sift through hundreds, sometimes thousands, of images to find the right ones. She often collaborates with architects and interior designers by collecting information such as the color palette, the ceiling height, the flow of foot traffic and the type of lighting, furniture and fabric that will be used. She contracts with custom framers and oversees installation.

The type of business and its client demographics shapes the selections Stewart finds. Art creates a mood, Stewart says, and can reflect a business' status or personality. A

continued on page 19

Art

(continued from page 13)

pediatric office needs playful, child-friendly art, while a general medical office would want soothing, beautiful images for patients who aren't feeling well. In a medical setting, images of nature can distract patients from their discomfort and can even help them heal, says Jennifer Reece, an interior designer who specializes in health care with Boulder Associates Architects and has worked with Stewart on more than a dozen projects.

Eric Rasmussen, director of growth and development at Sutter Medical Foundation in Sacramento, has worked with Stewart for five years on more than a dozen projects. "When you look at the total picture of your environment, ... you're a combination of your good staff, your good physicians and a great environment," Rasmussen says. "Art is a component of that wheel that needs to be there."

After graduating from UC Davis with a bachelor's degree in fine art in 1984, Stewart's career took a detour from the art world. She joined weight-loss company Jenny Craig only to realize, a decade later, that she hadn't picked up a paintbrush since graduating. "I felt like I completely lost myself," she says. She began taking a painting class and eventually co-founded the cooperative Chroma Gallery in Fair Oaks. She split her time working as a recruiter and later a grant writer while retraining herself as a painter in her free time. She eventually joined the Elliott Fouts Gallery in East Sacramento as an artist and also began art consulting. Six years later, with 22 years of business experience and 12 years as an artist, she left to start Art Consulting Services.

Some projects are more complicated. At Sutter Medical Foundation's Greenback Oaks medical office in Sacramento, the architect and interior designer developed a theme of branches over sky to reflect how oak trees once populated the area. Stewart found a muralist to paint clouds 20 feet above the lobby. She and her assistant drew branches and collaborated with a sculptor who transformed them into 19-foot brushed aluminum and copper.

Brett Light, clinic design project manager for Mercy Medical Group in Sacramento, has worked with Stewart for about three years. Stewart helped outfit Mercy's six-story flagship building, which opened in 2008 at 3000 Q St. in Sacramento. The building is Stewart's largest completed project with about 450 pieces.

Light says art makes a difference to employees and patients. The staff moved from an outdated building it had occupied for nearly 20 years to a new building with wood, stone accents and plenty of art, including a commissioned glass sculpture and original nature photography. The building resembles a hotel more than a medical office. Art, Light says, helps create a welcoming environment.

"We've noticed a definite difference in the way our staff responds to our patients" since moving in, Light says. "They're happier. They're more cheerful. They're willing to go the extra mile for the patient. Overall, (art) transforms people's attitudes." ©