

# Artist Friendly

An increasing number of talented visual and performing artists are discovering how affordable and affable Philadelphia is. Lucky for the rest of us.

BY CAROLINE TIGER



Graphic designer and screen-printer Eleanor Grosch works out of her South Philadelphia home.

Philadelphia was the last city Eleanor Grosch visited when she decided to relocate from Tampa, where she'd lived for three years after graduating from the University of South Florida.

"It was great in Tampa, but I was bored," says Grosch, an artist whose colorful animal images appear on everything from Keds to handmade prints to rock posters. "I'd dated every one I'd wanted to date. I was over it."

As with most creative people, her first thought was to move to New York City, but after visiting, "it seemed too busy," she says. Next she considered Boston and Chicago, but they didn't move her.

Philadelphia was her last try. She visited on a cold day in February, so it should've been the worst scouting trip of the bunch. Instead, it was love at first sight. Grosch was struck by the city's manageable size, by the human scale of its rowhouse-lined streets, and by the predominance of one-way streets, just right for biking. Everyone she met was friendly and forthcoming, and the pace seemed just right. "It's really calm, but still exciting," says Grosch. She and a friend moved here and split the rent for a one-bedroom a few blocks from Rittenhouse Square in the heart of the city.

Affordability is the main reason artists have been moving to Philadelphia

for years. Michael Yoder, a painter who moved to the city last March after living in Brooklyn for seven years, is still a little in awe of the spacious loft he's renting in Northern Liberties, a neighborhood north of the center city. He relishes his lack of roommates—a luxury he couldn't afford in New York. "In New York, no one talks about owning a house, but here a lot of my friends do," he says. "It's a possibility." And oddly enough, being from Philadelphia might end up helping his New York prospects. He's noticed that his new status as a Philadelphian earns him more face time when he shows his portfolio to New York gallery owners.

Rachel Zimmerman, founder of Inliquid.com, a Web site that acts as a hub for Philadelphia artists, says that having to travel to New York to meet with gallery owners is the one negative. "Philadelphia's art economy is lagging behind the artwork," she says. "There aren't enough places to show here." That was partly why she launched Inliquid, so collectors can glimpse the depth and breadth of talent in their own backyard. The site is also a clearinghouse for information on the city's numerous artist collaboratives, such as FLUX Space, and on smaller museums, like the Fleisher Art Memorial. "For Philadelphia to be the cultural mecca that people want it to be," she says, "We have to create a market here. People don't realize how much good

work there is. There's still a tendency to go to New York to buy."

Zimmerman's not alone in her dedication to nurturing the local arts scene. Inliquid is one of a large collection of nonprofits, funding sources, and artist-based associations working to help area artists. The Center for the Emerging Visual Arts, a 25-year old organization, grants two-year fellowships to local artists and runs Philadelphia Open Studio Tours, a self-guided city-wide tour of hundreds of artists' studios that happens over two October weekends. The Leeway Foundation supports female artists in the area. And a giant nonprofit, PEW Charitable Trusts, is Philadelphia-based and offers fellowships to Philadelphia artists as well as funding for regional cultural organizations.

Take these resources, the vibrant creative community in Philadelphia, and the much-lauded quality of life, and it's no wonder former Brooklynite Yoder found himself thinking every time he visited friends in Philly, "Now, why don't I live here?"

With his light-filled digs and a few upcoming shows, Yoder's Philadelphia story seems to have a happy ending. The same is true of Eleanor Grosch. Her rock posters attracted the attention of a *Nylon* magazine writer. That article led to a phone call from Keds, who commissioned her to design a line of "Eleanor" sneakers. A buyer for Philadelphia-based Urban Outfitters bought a pair of her shoes, found out she was local, and hired her to design pillows. Two years ago she bought a house in South Philadelphia, giving her room for the screen-printing processes that are essential to her work.

Grosch doesn't know if any of these successes would've happened if she'd gone to New York, where "anyone in the creative world is a dime a dozen." She prefers to be a big fish.

"On that first visit, I figured that if I loved Philadelphia in the cold, I'd love it the rest of the year," she says. "I was right."