

# CRAIN'S NEW YORK BUSINESS

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## A gallery director features only artists ages 60 and up

Catherine Curan



Buck Ennis

Vaccaro recognized older artists had a need that wasn't abstract: a place to show and sell their work.

### MARLENA VACCARO

**BORN:** Fort Lee, N.J.

**RESIDES:** Hell's Kitchen

**EDUCATION:** Bachelor's in art, Montclair State University; B.F.A. and M.F.A., Pratt Institute

**GOING PRO:** Vaccaro sold her first painting at age 14 to a teacher, who insisted that artists be paid. She has shown at OK Harris and other galleries, including on rare occasions the Carter Burden Gallery. "I'm a painter. I've always been. The fact that I share that world has always been an immediate bond between myself and the artists we show."

**AGE AND BEAUTY:** "You can look at any of the work in this gallery and have no clue if somebody is 20 or 120. That's a big piece of what we're trying to do: is to say, 'Let the prejudice go. Just look at the work.' You don't write somebody off because they're 60, 70 or 80."

Show Marlena Vaccaro a plain white wall and she'll envision an art gallery.

That's exactly what happened when the painter and nonprofit executive visited an arts- education program that was seeking to be acquired. Vaccaro, associate executive director of the Carter Burden Network, which provides senior services in the five boroughs, realized she didn't want to absorb the program's mission to teach art, but she did want its warehouse space just across the street from the Fashion Institute of Technology.

She returned to Carter Burden's board with a bold proposal: "Imagine exemplifying our mission by opening a gallery for older professional artists."

After getting the go-ahead, she put up some lights and sent 500 letters to potential clients. As word of this unique opportunity for often-overlooked artists spread, 700 replies poured in. Seven months later, Gallery 307 hosted its first show of work exclusively by New York City-based professional artists ages 60 and up.

That began a successful three-year run on Seventh Avenue before the gallery relocated to a larger space on West 28th Street in the beating heart of today's art market, West Chelsea.

In its 10th year, the Carter Burden Gallery stands out for featuring roughly 120 older professional artists annually, allocating 60% of the sale price to the artist (a 50-50 split is more common) and accepting submissions—at a rate of 70 to 80 a month—on its website.

Vaccaro strives to foster community—artists are required to attend the show featuring their work—and a welcoming place for buyers seeking affordable original works. One show each year includes about 70 artists whose 8-by-8-inch or 10-by-10-inch pieces are priced at \$200 each. "Part of the mission here is that we knock away the elitism," Vaccaro said.

She trained her artist's eye as a student at Pratt Institute, but she always has had an entrepreneurial streak: She ran her own SoHo gallery in the 1980s, then started a graphic design firm. Sales, roughly \$60,000 annually, have been rising but are not high enough to support the gallery's \$390,000 operating budget. Carter Burden is seeking a new corporate sponsor after the Macquarie Group Foundation recently ended its long-term support of \$600,000 for the last six years.

When Manhattan-based painter Stephen Cimini, 69, met with Vaccaro to discuss hanging canvases for his Burden gallery debut in 2018, Vaccaro surprised him by listening carefully to his suggestions.

"Her agenda," Cimini said, "was let's make the art look the best it can for everyone."