

“TAKING ALL THEIR D.C. CRED AND MOVING TO ASBURY PARK”



A POWERFUL NON-PROFIT ARTS NETWORKER COMES TO BANGS AVENUE

ASBURY PARK — Our city is surging in so many ways, and perhaps most importantly it's now drawing in top level arts leaders in the country.

A perfect example is the move back home by Ocean Township native Victoria Reis, the founder and director of the Washington D.C.-based Transformer Gallery. Transformer is a big deal down there, and Reis will continue to run this well-known arts institution in the nation's capitol from her new dream home in Neptune. (Her husband, the guitarist Brian Baker of Minor Threat and Bad Religion, tours all over the world so he can work from anywhere.)

The big story for our region is that Reis will now also give Transformer a continued presence in Asbury Park as it begins an annual summer residency for emerging visual artists called "Siren Arts." Meanwhile, Reis arrives home with years of connections and networking in the art world that are sure to benefit Asbury Park and our whole region.

"It's exciting to share with people in Washington, D.C. that Asbury Park is only three and a half hours away. It's exciting to introduce them to another destination," said Reis. "The more I talk about it, the more I hear people say they have a friend in Asbury Park or know somebody there."

Transformer's new annual summer residency program is "exactly what we want to see growing in Asbury Park," Reis said. "It just feels exciting for it to become a conduit for emerging artists, especially along the northeast corridor for connections to be made between New York, Newark, Philly and D.C."

For this first summer, Transformer has taken a downtown Asbury space at 529 Bangs Avenue across from Cafe Volan to feature the works of 12 emerging artists who will have a residency of several days each here to create their work. Their art will be featured in a summer-long exhibit, which will include various openings for different artists. The collection of works will be called Summer of Radical Love.

So here's a great event to attend: The Summer of Radical Love opening reception on Saturday, June 24, from 6:30 to 9 pm at the Transformer space at 529 Bangs Avenue. You can meet Transformer staff and the participating Siren Arts' art and guest curators, and learn about the innovative work exploring cultural, racial, sexual and gender equality that will be the theme of the residency.

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Transformer's Victoria Reis

Transformer is so potentially powerful to have here. Note the group's stated mission as a "non-profit, artist-centered visual arts organization, providing a consistent, supportive, and professional platform for emerging artists to explore and present experimental artistic concepts, build audiences for their work, and advance their careers. A catalyst and advocate for contemporary artists and emergent expression in the visual arts, Transformer connects and promotes emerging visual artists within regional, national and international contexts through a diverse range of innovative exhibition and program partnerships."

And to fully understand this story, it's important to explain the role of Victoria Reis and Transformer Gallery down in D.C.. The best source we can cite is that city's big alternative newspaper called Washington City Paper — the triCityNews of the nation's capital, if you will — who had this to say about Reis and Transformer in excerpts from an article last month:

Next month, D.C.'s scrappiest art space, Transformer, passes a major milestone. The arts nonprofit turns 15 years old in June, an achievement that is almost unheard of in the world of contemporary art. It's hard for a designer furniture boutique to stay open that long in trendy Logan Circle without getting the boot, much less a punk shoebox incubator for emerging artists, but Transformer has weathered it all.

So the gallery is throwing a party—a big one. On June 10—almost 15 years to the day from the opening of its first show in 2002—Transformer is hosting Shadow/Casters, a performance-art bash at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. That's a big deal for a local art shop (although this will mark Transformer's second collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution).

The quinceañera also marks a big transition for Victoria Reis, the executive and artistic director of the cozy art gallery she co-founded in 2002 with Jayme McLellan. Reis and her husband, Brian Baker, a founding member of Minor Threat and guitarist for Bad Religion, are taking all their D.C. cred and moving to Asbury Park, New Jersey, where Reis grew up. But Transformer isn't going anywhere, she insists.

"We're expanding our programming to include an Asbury [Park]-based summer residency and exhibition program for emerging artists," Reis says. "Since I was a teenager I've thought, this place is just such an amazing place for an artist residency program. When I was 15, I thought, it's going to get funded by Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi. Maybe it still will."

Siren Arts, Transformer's Asbury Park extension, will serve as an annual summer-long residency and exhibition program set in a storefront space on Bangs Avenue, just two blocks from the ocean. It's not far from the house that Reis and her husband just purchased, a 1926 Dutch Colonial on a half-acre of land that she describes as her dream home. The two of them summer in Asbury Park every year, while they weren't looking to move, they couldn't pass up the opportunity when Baker spotted the house.

Siren Arts won't be Transformer's first foray in New Jersey. In 2014, Reis assembled 12 artists from across the East Coast—including two artists from D.C., Lisa Marie Thalhammer and Tang—for a boardwalk exhibit at Asbury Park's 5th Avenue Pavilion. Promised Land was a one-off, week-long residency funded by the Warhol Initiative, a capacity-building program by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, one of Transformer's longtime supporters. Siren Arts' ongoing programming will be modeled after that show, which drew more than 15,000 visitors over the course of a six-week-long run.

So there you go. For years, we've talked about how Asbury Park will attract media coverage far beyond Monmouth County — and draw in people from large cities with a progressive and creative bent. That's happening all the time now, and that excerpt from Washington City Paper demonstrates it at so many levels.

After the launch of Summer of Radical Love on June 24, the Transformer Bangs Avenue space will be open Thursdays through Saturdays from 1-7 pm, and by appointment. For more information and continued updates throughout the summer, visit Transformer's website transformerdc.org and you'll see the link for Asbury Park's Siren Arts program, which already includes four openings scheduled from June 24 through July 29.



Transformer's Victoria Reis inside the group's space on Bangs Avenue. Brooklyn-based artist J. Morrison's Homocats wallpaper in background.

Victoria Reis with husband Brian Baker back in Washington D.C. for Transformer's 13th Annual Silent Auction and Benefit Party. Photo by Nick Klein

