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Small spaces, big ideas: Little Galleries arrives on Monroe Street

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on Tuesday 07/16/2013 3:45 pm

Last Friday a new art gallery opened with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Monroe Street. The building's sleek black lines and glass windows blend in with the surrounding architecture, and its first exhibit is attracting plenty of foot traffic. Pretty good for a gallery with less than three square feet of space.

Madison's second Little Gallery, located in front of Monroe Street Framing at 1901 Monroe St., rises only to chest height and could be mistaken for a podium, but local artists see huge potential. Similar in concept to Madison's Little Free Libraries, [Little Galleries](#) are bringing art to people on the sidewalk.

"What I love about it is we get a lot of people who don't go to the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art," says Rachel Bruya, the galleries' founder. The [first gallery](#) opened earlier this summer in front of her house on the 1900 block of East Mifflin Street. She plans to open a third in August on the UW campus.

The project expands the concept of public art to include gallery space, showcasing monthly exhibits by local artists. Connecting these artists to the community and to each other is a primary goal. With few venues to show their work, local artists can be "invisible" in the community, Bruya says. The first artists featured have been hyperlocal, living just blocks away.

The opportunity for his neighbors to see his work was part of the appeal for Scott Espeseth, whose drawings are currently on display at the [Little Monroe Gallery](#). Espeseth says he usually shows his work in other cities.

Espeseth strives to use darkness and light in intriguing ways. On one side of the gallery are delicately detailed silver point drawings; on the other are dense ink pictures that almost disappear in a black background. Espeseth says the latter have an "eerie presence" since viewers must look closely to discern the ink images. He also explores ideas about texture with a plate of two sponges that are so engaging the viewer is likely to forget how mundane they are.

Showcasing a variety of media and subject matter is important to Bruya, including conceptual pieces not frequently accepted at other galleries. The Little Mifflin Gallery's current exhibit, "Wedge Issue," uses Plexiglas sculpture to look at the wealth divide.

In displaying the work of professional artists, the stakes are higher for the Little Galleries than for the Little Free Libraries, where passersby [can take or leave used books](#). The galleries can still serve as a catalyst for sidewalk interaction, though, says artist Jeremy Wineberg, curator and caretaker of the Little Monroe Gallery.

The project has received support from the [UW Art Department](#), [Dane Arts](#) and the [Madison Arts Commission](#). Two UW graduate students designed and constructed the first galleries.

Bruya and Wineberg want to further develop the project, possibly opening more galleries around Madison or partnering with little galleries in other cities for art exchanges.

"It's an active research project on how people see art," Bruya says.

