Fertile Ground
Struggles with family-building lead to the creation of The Art of Infertility.

By Scott Renshaw @scottrenshaw

As with any emotionally trying life experience, dealing with infertility is hard to do alone. A new local art exhibit on the subject of infertility similarly proves the importance of such support, as it required a collaboration between three organizations.

Art of Infertility
Art Access Gallery
230 S. 500 West, Ste. 125
Feb. 16–March 9
Opening reception Feb. 16, 6–9 p.m.

One More Shot
Urban Arts Gallery
137 S. Rio Grande St.
Feb. 15
6 p.m.
artofinfertility.org
art and oral histories—by people struggling with infertility that might offer therapeutic opportunities for the artists, and education for the public. While that exhibit was up in May of 2014, Walker traveled to Washington, D.C., for a legislative advocacy day by a national infertility support group. There she met Maria Novotny, also a Michigan resident, who was beginning graduate study focusing on the way women process and talk about infertility.

"At that time, Elizabeth didn't really have a plan," Novotny says. "So we started discussing what she wanted to do with the project."

Initially, the scope was small. Walker and Novotny brought their *Art of Infertility* work to "pop-up" events affiliated with fund-raising walks in California, but they began to realize that they wanted to include stories representing as many perspectives as possible. "The stories you don't hear are the stories of more diverse experiences," Walker says. "Infertility doesn't discriminate."

The *Art of Infertility* project began to receive media coverage in outlets including *Psychology Today* and *Huffington Post*, and subsequently came to the attention of Camille Hawkins, executive director of the Utah Infertility Resource Center. Hawkins was looking for a community partner to work with on bringing the project to Utah, and a friend mentioned the mission of Art Access Gallery to bring art opportunities to under-served communities. "We decided this would be a really cool opportunity both to help our clients engage in artwork in an art workshop setting with professional artists and art therapists," Hawkins says, "and then to display the artwork and use it as a method of storytelling to bring awareness to what people struggling with infertility and family-building go through."

Beginning last year, Utah Infertility Resource Center clients participated in workshops at Art Access Gallery, including mentorships in which they would be paired with a professional artist. Yet the goal was not on producing a "professional" work of art, according to Hawkins, which helped allay the anxieties of participants about the potential for these works to appear on a gallery wall. "We explained to the attendees that it's not about the artwork being a masterpiece; it's about the artwork reflecting what it's like to go through infertility," she says. "It's an awareness tool, so our community can learn more. That really helped everybody understand, it doesn't matter what this piece looks like. What matters is the story."

Those stories cover a broad range of experiences, and a wide emotional spectrum, according to Art Access Gallery programs director Elise Butterfield. "One of the things I found interesting when I first started talking to Camille," she says, "is they don't think of infertility as just a medical situation, but perhaps a same-sex couple that can't conceive on their own, or a single parent who doesn't have a partner. ... I think that while there is certainly pain expressed in a lot of these works, there's also a pretty deep sense of hope, and this vision of what could
Additional programming includes a screening of the infertility-themed documentary *One More Shot* on Feb. 15, followed by a panel discussion with Walker and Novotny, as well as the filmmakers.

While the educational component of the exhibition is certainly important in raising awareness about the many kinds of infertility journeys that exist, all of the organizers seem to agree that the most fulfilling part of this process has been seeing the artists turn their experiences into a creative work. "It was very powerful to watch clients who have no control over their reproduction, and their ability to have a family, take control over a piece of artwork, and use materials to put together something very meaningful to reflect their experience," Hawkins says.

"When you think about infertility," Novotny says, "there's a lack of materiality. Art became that materiality, a visible thing so people could see and understand that experience." To which Walker adds, "[Clients] can be reluctant or scared to come, but they're really surprised by how easy it is, how accessible it is, having that opportunity to create something when you've been trying so hard to create, with no success."

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Scott Renshaw

scott@cityweekly. @scottrenshaw

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