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## Marquee talent for Park Theater fundraiser

By Jeff Gomez



"You and Me" by Ames Palms Photo provided

To celebrate the 80th anniversary of Lafayette's Park Theater, The Park Theater Trust - an all-volunteer group dedicated to reopening the classic theater - has partnered with the Jennifer Perlmutter Gallery to hold an exhibition of neon art. The show features work from three Bay Area artists: Shawna Peterson, Bill Concannon, and Ames Palms. All three have a deep history and expertise in the form, having worked with neon for decades.

The show came together through a serendipitous set of circumstances. When plans for a huge birthday celebration for the Park Theater - which opened on August 11, 1941 - had to be scaled back due to lingering concerns around COVID, the board of directors of The Park Theater Trust thought a show of neon art would be a good way to celebrate the theater, and the town's history.

Tracey Karsten Farrell, a member of the TPTT board, got in touch with the Jennifer Perlmutter Gallery, which sits half a block away from the theater on the corner of Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Moraga Way. "Jennifer has been very supportive of our efforts since the beginning," Farrell says. "Her gallery is so innovative, and such a presence in downtown Lafayette, we were thrilled when she agreed to do this for us."

Perlmutter, a longtime resident of the area and patron and supporter of local artists, thought it was an excellent idea; she'd wanted to curate a show of neon art for some time. For Perlmutter, the show's an opportunity to have people look at objects in a whole new way, elevating neon above mere decoration or advertising purposes. "The artist has a point of view and perspective they're expressing, and so when you show pieces like these it sparks a conversation," says Perlmutter. "It becomes about ideas rather than signage."

A show of neon art is more challenging than just hanging paintings. All the pieces require electricity and, because they're made out of glass, are quite fragile. It's a situation the artists have to deal with every day. Creating with neon, says artist Ames Palms, "You have the risk of being shocked, cut, and burned." But the love for their chosen medium shows in their pieces, which combine art and science to create something technically intricate and wholly beautiful.

All of the pieces on display will be available for sale, with 50% of the proceeds being donated to The Park Theater Trust. The neon artists are also willing to donate a portion of any additional commissions to the Park Theater restoration effort.

"I hope this will encourage guests to make a purchase," says Perlmutter, "knowing that not only are they supporting the artists, but also the Park Theater. This show gives our community, and the gallery, a chance to have a real stake in the future of Lafayette."

The Park Theater Trust is currently engaged on a mission to raise \$8 million, with \$3 million going toward the purchase of the building, and the rest paying for renovations and additions such as adding a mezzanine theater and rooftop terrace. Restoring the theater's vintage neon marquee will cost around \$80,000.

The Trust's model of a nonprofit ownership with a for-profit operator means that the current capital campaign is a one-time ask of the community. Any subsequent fundraising will be minimal and only necessary to maintain TPTT's nonprofit status.

The vision of the Park Theater Trust is to make the spot be more than just a place to watch movies. "We see a lot of alignment with the schools, other nonprofit organizations, and location institutions such as the library and Town Hall Theatre," says Farrell. "There are so many things we hope to do to bring the Park Theater back to life for everyone in our community."

Once the building is purchased, the renovations and restorations will take about a year. The plan is to have the theater open in 2023.

The neon show currently at the Jennifer Perlmutter Gallery focuses attention on the art of neon, the historical significance of the Park Theater, and the value of saving and bringing it back to life for everyone in the community. The show runs through Nov. 6 and is open Wednesday to Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Masks are required for entry, and private group showings are available by appointment.

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