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LOVING IT: John Braseth, director of the Woodside/Braseth Gallery, in Seattle, says running a gallery is about love — not money. Behind him is one of many paintings by Northwest artist Kenneth Callahan on display now.

Art's sake

As Woodside/Braseth Gallery marks 50 years, owner John Braseth says money isn't key to success with art

By BETHANY OVERLAND
STAFF WRITER

LESSONS LEARNED

John Braseth on owning and operating an art gallery

1. On running a gallery: In the good times save your money because the bad times can be rather extreme.
2. On buying art: If you are thinking of acquiring art, look at as much original art as you possibly can and once your eye tells you that you can't live without this art for the rest of your life, then go look some more!
3. Advice to artists: So much has been said in art especially over the past 400 years. If you want to be a professional and successful artist in the marketplace, you must differentiate yourself artistically. Being original is the most difficult thing to attain.

— BETHANY OVERLAND

tol Hill neighborhood to near Westlake, and again when gallery founder Gordon Woodside sold the gallery to Braseth in 1992, though he visited the gallery every day for the next 15 years until his death in 2007.

Like many art galleries around the nation, sales have ebbed and flowed with the economy, but the Woodside/Braseth sticks to one of its foundational understandings: You can't let money drive the art gallery business.

No one learned that faster than Braseth, who made \$4.50 an hour with no benefits in his first 10 years at the gallery.

"I'd always wondered if art would afford me my traditional goals, like having a wife and kids," said Braseth.

When Braseth considered leaving to find a more lucrative career, Woodside offered him a partnership in 1982.

"It was more of a depression-era partnership. I got my name on the shingle," Braseth said. "I stayed because I loved it. If money is what drives me in the art business, I will never be successful."

And if true love of art is what drives success in this indus-

In 1978, John Braseth, then an 18-year-old art intern, walked through the doors of the Woodside Gallery. He was going to night school at Seattle Central Community College, and knew little to nothing about art or working in a gallery.

He didn't know it then, but he would soon be named partner of what would become one of Seattle's longest-operating art galleries.

"I didn't find art," said Braseth. "Art found me. You can't teach that kind of passion, not in this industry."

Celebrating its 50th year in 2011, the Woodside/Braseth Gallery is slightly older than the Space Needle. Thousands of pieces of art have been sold; even more people have viewed those pieces. Some exhibits were loved, others not so much. Some have given gallery visitors a glimpse of history, such as works by famed Northwest painter Morris Graves. Through the Woodside/Braseth, blossoming artists such as Seattle's Jared Rue would gain exposure.

There would also be changes in the operations of the business, such as when the gallery moved from Seattle's Capi-

Private collectors keep doors open

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try, it's likely that Woodside/Braseth will continue its claim as Seattle's longest-running gallery for years to come.

Though the Woodside/Braseth is still seeing some effects of the recession, this gallery — featuring the likes of photographer Ansel Adams and sculptor and painter George Tsutakawa — is posting sales in excess of \$4 million this year. And that, Braseth said, is usually a good hint about the status of the economy.

"Sales had started going down in 2006; I think people could feel the bubble (of the economy)," he said. "A lot of our private clients still had the money, but how do you justify buying art when you need to lay off your employees?"

Art collecting is often one of the first luxury habits people tend to drop during economic down times, said Braseth. Between 2008 and 2010, sales dropped by 30 percent at Woodside/Braseth. Nationally, sales in art galleries dropped about 67 percent, he said.

"In September of '08, the phone didn't ring for 30 days," said Braseth, who has three employees. "But we'd been through this before, like Black Monday in 1987 and even right after

9/11."

Still, people came to see the gallery's displays, Braseth said, noting that even though they weren't buying, the art seemed to have a healing and soothing effect on people during troubled times.

The gallery survived the last three years because of some very loyal clients, he said. Corporate accounts like the one the gallery landed this year with the Swedish hospital group's new Issaquah campus can help sustain a gallery through a rough period. Still, corporate sales only account for about 15 percent of its gross sales, Braseth said.

At the end of the day, it's the private buyers and collectors who keep the doors of the Woodside/Braseth Gallery open, and those people remain dear

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JOHN BRASETH
WOODSIDE/BRASETH GALLERY

to Braseth's heart because ultimately, they are the ones who love art perhaps as much as he does.

"There are a lot of people who think of art as elitism; it doesn't provide shelter or transportation," said Braseth. "But there are also a lot of people who just want to live with art. Maybe they don't have the big fancy houses, but they need art in their lives all the same."