

CENTERSTAGE

Chicago's Original City Guide

Editorial Review of Las Manos Gallery

A stone figure sits in the window of Las Manos gallery, its right hand raised with the palm facing toward you. If you're familiar with Buddhist iconography, you'll recognize that the hand of the statue is in abhaya mudra, the gesture of protection or "no fear"; if you don't grasp the religious sentiment, you'll still get the idea that it's okay to wander into this gallery. Like the statue in the window, Las Manos works on many levels. While aficionados will find art that challenges and stimulates, novices will encounter an engaging space that's free of pretense or intimidation.

Las Manos offers art of "River North quality without the attitude," says owner Michelle Peterson-Albandoz, sitting in her studio in the shed behind the gallery. That the gallery's owner is herself an artist is something else that distinguishes Las Manos from other establishments. Though Peterson-Albandoz's paintings (spidery cityscapes on window glass; evocative, sepia-toned pictures on Plexiglas) are often on display, they share the gallery space democratically with an eclectic assortment of works of other artists. Depending on when you visit (shows change monthly), you might find paintings and drawings, photography, sculpture, video or installations. The themes of group exhibitions range from ruminations on birds to art from death row. Las Manos also serves as a community performance space, hosting discussions, dramatic monologues and panel discussions on topics like prison reform.

The gallery shows work by artists at all stages of career development. The prices of many of the works in the gallery can often be affordable enough to entice one to consider becoming (gasp!) a bona fide art collector. Even if you do still encounter sticker shock, Las Manos's genial atmosphere will keep you from choking on your Chablis.