Prime Time: To Be Above Ground

The legacy of aging artists is saved in a project emanating from New York City.

IF THERE’S ONE THING we know about aging artists, it’s this: They’re adaptable, and far from stuck—in their ways or in their styles. Joan Jeffri, the director of the Research Center for Arts and Culture at THE LEGACY FUND at the Actors Fund did field research and more than 200 interviews to collect information from senior artists in the New York area. They’re collected in the report Above Ground: Information on Artists III: Special Focus New York City Aging Artists. (More information is available at artsandcultureresearch.org/rcac.) “They (senior artists) have high self-esteem, tenacity, perseverance, put the good news and the bad news into their work and are models for society, often illustrating what the baby boomers seek—a life of meaningful engagement,” says Jeffri. “Seventy-seven percent communicate every day with other artists; they go to their studios on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis, even if it takes an hour to get there. They change their medium when required rather than give up art-making.”

The concept for Above Ground was built on studies the Research Center for Arts and Culture has been doing since 1985 on living artists to highlight their conditions and living situations. “We realized nobody had taken a look at older visual artists,” says Jeffri, “who have no unions, no collective agency and who, unlike performers, usually work alone and never retire.” After collecting the data, the researchers discovered that only...
one in five professional artists had documentation for their work and more than 75 percent have no will or estate plan. Out of this discovery grew another project (in Washington D.C. as well as New York City) called ART CART: SAVING THE LEGACY, wherein advanced university students in the arts or health and aging are matched with older artists to assist them in preserving their work and “saving our national legacy,” as Jeffri says. The project launched a website, elderartistslegalresource.org, to help with wills and estate planning. “That older artists are a model for society” is the lesson Jeffri says she has learned by working on these projects. She has also learned that “this intergenerational interdisciplinary work is incredibly empowering for everyone involved. It has propelled artists to obtain more grants, recognition, studio space and awards, while giving a new generation of students who will work in health care and geriatrics a particular sensibility, as well as providing art students with skills to document their own work at 23, not 73.” M.G.