

## New spot offers bold statement to city's arts district

By Rashod Ollison  
The Virginian-Pilot  
© April 3, 2015

### NORFOLK

Brother Rutter does a quick, impromptu shuffle under the neon treehouse hanging high above the dust and disarray.

In horn-rimmed glasses and a sharply cut suit, he looks very much like the successful attorney he is as part of the Rutter Mills law firm. But Rutter is giddy about another venture that has nothing to do with law and everything to do with his longtime passion for contemporary art.

Starting tonight and running through May 2, the Rutter Family Art Foundation, which he oversees with his wife, Meredith, will present its inaugural show of the NEON District (New Energy of Norfolk), a rebranding of the city's arts district, between downtown and Ghent. Appropriately enough, the first exhibit, Aglow, is a showcase of neon sculptures by 13 artists from around the world.

It will take place at the old Texaco Building at 759 Granby St., now called Work | Release, which Rutter co-owns with his wife and his law partner Robert Mills. Rutter said the plan is to make Work | Release the epicenter of bold artistic activities in Norfolk - a combination of art gallery, organic eatery, bar, lounge and special events venue.

It could also serve as an entry point, of sorts, to this still-forming arts district that has mostly been the domain of members in the local arts cliques.

"We wanted to have a downtown space for the creative community and for people who may not be engaged with contemporary art," Rutter said. "If we can bring them into a space that they like and feel comfortable, then we can introduce them to the art without the intimidating space."

Inside that space, workers push in parts to later assemble in the exhibition, including a barrel of fragile glass bubbles made down the street at the Chrysler Museum of Art's glass studio. Norfolk-based artist Hannah Kirkpatrick was one of three collaborators on the neon treehouse suspended from the ceiling. It's one of two pieces she has in the exhibit.

"What's great about this new rebranding of this area is that there's a lot of opportunity for people to get involved if they want to," said Kirkpatrick, a New Jersey native who moved to Norfolk three years ago. "It's nice because it's open, and there's an open conversation about it. Things are getting built, and it's great to see it all from the start, but we're nowhere near finished."

Work | Release is an airy 15,000 square feet with movable walls, the better to showcase exhibits with varying space demands.

Sleek black and white leather sofas, tables and chairs surround a makeshift stage. In the rear of the room, a bar will serve alcoholic drinks mixed with organic juices. From the kitchen, costumers can buy tapas-style food - pates, sandwiches and salads - made with local ingredients. The Aglow exhibit this weekend will be free to the public, but some future events will have an admission price.

"What we're trying to give people is not just an evening-out experience," Rutter said, "but an evening-out intellectual experience. We want to engage people's minds."

It's an ambitious plan that's more likely to attract and engage the nearby Ghent or Freemason communities than other Hampton Roads residents, given the limited parking.

"People have said about the arts community of Norfolk or Hampton Roads is that it never seems to coalesce, to come together," Rutter said. "One thing that has been missing is that sense of place. We think that the NEON District and Work | Release can be that space."

A consistent schedule of events, especially in the first few months, is important to keep the momentum going, said Careyann Weinberg, the venue director. "On any night that we're open, you may see a DJ or a band or a theatrical performance. We'll also have throughout the year 'pop-up' exhibitions, shorter, smaller-scale exhibitions."

In May, senior projects from the Governor's School for the Arts will take over Work | Release. "Nobody Writes Letters Anymore," the venue's next large exhibition, opening in June, will showcase graffiti art.

Other businesses and project plans are under way as part of the NEON rebranding, including the opening of Zeke's Beans & Bowls, already a favorite in Virginia Beach, and Glass Wheel Studio. The second and third floors of Work | Release will offer housing for artists. A NEON Festival is planned for October.

"The ground is fertile for the next phase after that," said Jesse Scaccia, editor of AltDaily, a Pilot Media Co. property, and chairman of the arts district's public art committee. "There are about half a dozen properties on Granby that are for rent or for sale. We all - led by the Downtown Norfolk Council - are working hard to recruit businesses that will complement the New Energy of Norfolk vibe."

The possibilities that can happen in and around Work | Release excite Rutter.

"This venue gives us the opportunity to have just about any type of art show we want, any type of creative system that we want," Rutter said. "It really allows the creative community to have a place of their own."

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## **IF YOU GO**

**What:** Aglow exhibit premiere and grand opening of Work | Release

**When:** 8 tonight

**Where:** Work | Release, 759 Granby St., Norfolk

**Cost:** Free

**More info:** [www.neonnfk.com](http://www.neonnfk.com) (<http://www.neonnfk.com>)