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NEWSLETTERS



# Her new gallery offers a third space for art and inspiration in Lawrenceville

Morgan Overton, a fifth-generation Pittsburgher, opens an art gallery and retail store inside Market House

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Shaylah Brown/Post-Gazette



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Morgan Overton sashayed through her art gallery, welcoming guests during the grand opening.



Her stance was diplomatic, and she moved confidently with a gentle power that pays homage to her ballet roots.



People lingered and came in and out of the gallery from different moments throughout Overton's life. Beyond the eye-catching [storytelling of her artwork](#), many say they can feel the artist's



Storytelling of her artwork, many say they can feel the artist's vibrancy and magnetism in her paintings.

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The Penn Hills native opened [Morgan Overton Art Gallery & Shop](#) inside Lawrenceville Market House at the end of October. It began through happenstance — she was visiting a friend who has a jewelry business in the co-retail space.

Overton, who has been a visual artist since she was young, knows that navigating the art world is not linear, but a journey that ebbs and flows. Something that has remained constant is a desire for her artwork to make people feel something.

“If a piece of my artwork or just engaging with me about my art stops someone in their tracks and causes them to think with more intention or feel motivated to be changemakers in their own right, that is ultimately what I want,” she said.

A turning point for the 31-year-old came this past summer, when she was in New York City for a summer artist residency program at the [School of Visual Arts](#).

“That experience was so transformative because I had endless time to focus on perfecting my craft,” Overton said. “I had galleries that I could visit when I needed more inspiration, museums, exhibitions and solo exhibitions.”

She called the energy “generative.” When she thinks about New York and ideas that came out of her time with SVA, she responds with a passionate “Ahhh, yes.”

“I was able to go into a whole new domain and level with my artistic expression,” Overton said.

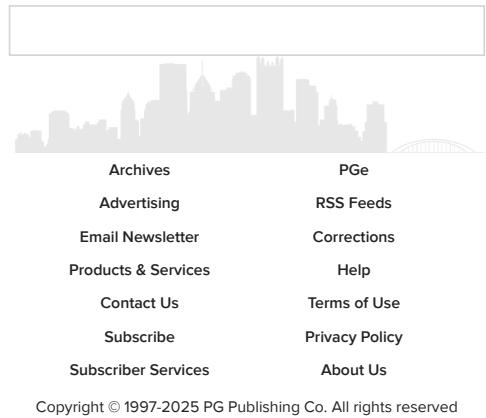
Coming back to Pittsburgh, she was focused on building upon the momentum that started in New York.

She does a lot of genealogy research, digging into family history and archives to piece together oral histories. For a lot of Black Americans, genealogy is fractured because of the transatlantic slave trade. They can often find only bits and pieces, if there is access to any information at all.

“So a lot of us are walking around with, like fragmented shadows behind us ... the who and the what and the names,” Overton said.

Poring through old newspapers and archives, she has found articles about her great-great-grandfather, [G. Harry Bolden](#), a well-known baritone singer in the Hill District who moved to

Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. The finding made her journey to New York feel even more aligned.



“I almost felt like I was following his path, being in New York and being able to express my creative self fully,” she said.

She created a piece dedicated to him and works that honor [Ella Louise Clark Williams](#), her maternal great-great-grandmother, and [Frances Williams](#), her grandmother, whom she never had a chance to meet.

Some of her newer work explores Afro-Futurism, a movement that combines art, science and technology to reinterpret stories of the African diaspora, and envision a future where Black people thrive.

She created a painting about matriarchs of the future that represent love and humanity. Near the end of her residency at the School of Visual Arts, there were open studios that allowed people in New York City to experience her work.

“People of all backgrounds resonated with my work. They were thinking about immigration stories, about their own families, just thinking about their humanity.”

Humanity is a throughline of Overton’s art. She centers Black figures, but she hopes that anyone is able to see themselves in her work.

Her goal is to collaborate with other art entities and organizations in Pittsburgh and other cities, as she has done in the past.

Overton has helped raise funds for [JADA House International](#), a Hazelwood-based organization that supports people of all ages with social and spiritual challenges. During the grand opening, JADA House International founder and executive director Terri Shields purchased a piece for her office to complement another work by the artist.

Overton wants to host workshops for artists and non-artists to have a space for cultural healing, free expression and creativity.

“I just believe that this will be the balm or a contributing balm in this time where everything feels so contentious and at times dark.... What are those glimmers of light in our community? That is what I want the gallery to be overall,” she said.

She sees the art gallery as a potential third space — a place for people to come together outside their homes and workplaces.

“We are an artsy city. We have a legacy of arts here, but there are moments where it feels like a concrete ceiling,” Overton said.

As an artist, she’s found career stagnancy in Pittsburgh individually and collectively.

“I talked to a lot of artists who say, ‘I look forward to the day I can say I left Pittsburgh,’ and this is coming from native Pittsburghers. I don’t want to be enticed with the thought of leaving every other month in order to live out my gifts and talents,” she said.

“I do credit a lot of artist-led organizations here, and I’m not trying to take away from any of that, but there is a different sort of path that particularly Black and brown artists have to navigate here.”

Aaron Stuckey, 39, of Penn Hills, Overton’s boyfriend, was pleased with the turnout at the gallery opening. This is only a taste of what she has planned, he said.

“One of the biggest struggles of being an artist in Pittsburgh or an entrepreneur is there can be a lack of appreciation and awareness about what you do.... Just the location and the effort put into it is a showcase of what people are capable of in the city and motivates other entrepreneurs to feel more confident about their endeavors,” Stuckey said.

He has many Overton pieces in his house, but his favorite is one depicting Roberto Clemente, the Pirates Hall of Fame right-fielder. During the gallery grand opening, Stuckey wore a shirt featuring his girlfriend’s artwork, a silhouette of Pittsburgh’s skyline.

“Morgan has been one of my best friends since high school,” said Christopher Paul, 33, of Shadyside. “I have witnessed her entire career from college and community activism and this is just a cool extension of her purpose.

“I am just so proud. It’s nice to see something she has been working so hard for come to fruition.”

David DeBor, 35, also of Shadyside, spoke about the feel of the gallery.

“It’s a cool pop of culture right in the middle of the city. I think Pittsburgh is lucky to have this,” he said.

Curating the gallery space to make it feel refreshing, different and encouraging was extremely intentional for Overton.

“When I first entered the space, there was this gorgeous emerald and gold wall,” she said. “It was already there from a previous business, just inviting me in.”

It gave her a Harlem Renaissance energy that she had been subconsciously looking for. The opposite wall has the classic white art gallery aesthetic.

In addition to Overton's work, the gallery offers retail items along the emerald wall. Patrons have the opportunity to experience her art at any price point, from a magnet to a T-shirt to a print that can start their journey as an art collector.

Overton, who has undergraduate and master's degrees from the University of Pittsburgh, previously worked in the political sector, serving as the first Black woman to be vice chair of the Allegheny County Democratic Committee.

While she is no longer involved in politics, she considers an artist's practice to have political overtones. "Uplifting the humanity of those who this country is trying to silence right now."

Overton, a fifth-generation Pittsburgher, said her first encounter with art came from her parents, who are also creatives. There's a photo of her playing piano on her father's lap before she turned 1.

"I have been an artist ever since I could blink," she said.

"Because I am someone who has been a first-generation college graduate and all of those milestones, I don't have a blueprint to go off of.

"If anything, I am creating the blueprint for the next generation through faith, determination, having conviction and standing on the shoulders of people who came before me."

*Morgan Overton Art Gallery & Shop, 4112 Butler St., Lawrenceville, is open noon-5 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and noon-4 p.m. Sunday.  
[morganovertonart.com](http://morganovertonart.com)*

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Shaylah Brown is a features reporter covering all things culture, including health, food, real estate and people doing great things. A New Jersey native, she is enjoying learning about Western Pa. through the lens of art, dance and nature.

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