

Places

● What's 67 years old, three stories high, and has a paneled elevator, marble staircase, roof garden, and three caskets? It's Gallery 1134.

The caskets were left by Walter Rudolph, who owned a casket factory in the building at 1134 W. Washington Blvd. for 40 years. Before that, it housed the Free Methodist Publishing Co.

It became an art gallery after Loren Billings, a sculptor and ceramist, and her writer husband, Bob, bought the building last year. The Billings are temporarily living on the second floor while converting the third floor into an apartment.

The complete transformation of the building into studios and living quarters, including a wine cellar, will take about 10 years, Loren estimates, but already four studios have been rented to artists and photographers, and the first exhibit was held in January.

Eight artists, including Loren and sculptor Al Ornelas — the gallery's art director — participated. Loren's aim is to make the gallery a showplace of ideas, with an emphasis on performance, a trend in which the artist becomes the art object; guests at the inaugural exhibit, for instance, saw an artist rise from one of the caskets.

Next was a show billed as "Spumoni Village: Your Portrait in Vegetable," an aptly chosen title, perhaps, for a gallery only a block from the Randolph Street market. An electronic exhibit is planned, and Loren hopes to start an artists' flea market. "We would like



Loren Billings: caskets, sculpture, and spumoni.

Bob Fila

all the artists within the reach of our doors to feel free to approach us at any time and say, in effect, 'I have an idea — it needs a place to be expressed,'" she says.

Loren herself works in light and electronics. "Through laser light I attempt to create a three-dimensional environment in which the spectator is a participant, an actual physical part of the piece; it's a placing of the spectator in a previously unexperienced situation," she says.

She also works with "funky" odds and ends left by Rudolph. Along with the three caskets, his legacy to the Billings includes several sewing machines, a steam table, crates of hinges and screws, and pieces of fringe.

Bogart posters adorn the walls in Loren's basement office. The upper floors are paneled in oak and walnut. The 50-by-100-foot building is a far cry from the one-room apartment in Sandburg Village that was formerly home for the Billings.

The roof garden can be reached only by climbing a ladder to an opening in the ceiling. Loren hopes to grow tomatoes and flowers there.

She says that she has brushed aside the idea that their home is a former casket factory, adding that the art exhibits make the environment a happy and colorful one. And the artists, used to cramped spaces, are excited about having all that room in the gallery to display their works.

George Cohen