The Second Time Around: The Resource Exchange
Fishtown's environmentalists are selling vintage art supplies.

Photo: Dayz Terry

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The Resource Exchange, an environmentally conscious art supply store, is a place of forgotten things: vintage film cameras, trays of dusty beads pinched from once beautiful necklaces, scraps of bright, colorful fabric snipped from the ends of used rolls. Walking through the organized chaos of The Exchange, the rows of half-used canvasses and large, intimidating movie set pieces give the feel of an eclectic vintage flea market. But The Exchange isn't the final resting place for these items. Instead, it's a stepping stone. Self-described as a "creative reuse center," the store gives these items new life and repurposes them into something else entirely.
The Resource Exchange is about seven miles from campus at 2nd and Cecil B. Moore Avenue. Though it takes a trek to get there, the store is easily accessible by SEPTA and is conveniently located right next to the Market–Frankford Line. The Resource Exchange is about as far from Plaza, Dick Blick's or Michael's Crafts as an arts supply store could possible get. Instead of selling new, the store sells good quality semi-used arts supplies—like a thrift store, but for art instead of clothes. The organization's mission statement is simple: It's a nonprofit dedicated to promoting creative reuse, recycling and resource conservation. The Exchange diverts valuable materials from the landfill and redirects them to artists, builders, educators and the general public. Alison Hoban, the supervisor of the organization, speaks with me at the well–loved crafts table in the back of the store, its top smeared with white streaks of paint and dents from projects past. As she labels and tags a pair of old window shutters that had just been dropped off that morning, Alison explains where the idea behind the organization came from.

“Our Executive Director, Karyn Gerred, she was a scenic painter for films, and through working that industry, she saw a lot of the materials for the sets be tossed out after the filming was over.” Drawing a skinny number ten on the shutters’ price tag, she continues, “And so to prevent that happening, she started saving things in the navy yard (mostly lumber) from the set, and then from there, the organization moved to a space in Port Richmond, and grew to accepting other kinds of materials from all kinds of places. And then about three years ago, we moved to this location, and expanded even more.”

With each location move, The Exchange was able to take more and more diverse materials. What began with lumber and set pieces soon expanded to arts supplies, and then finally included architecture installations, home decor and the rest of the store's hodgepodge of items. Alison explains the niche that The Exchange has now been able to fill, thanks to their expansion: “You know, there’s a lot of great organizations that take in clothing, shoes, stuff like that, and what’s kind of missing is taking those other things that people don’t need anymore, but don’t necessarily want to throw away especially when they could have some other purpose.” Looking around the repurposed warehouse, at old photo lanterns, a glowing neon-pink sign that reads “Elvis,” and a vintage mens' grooming kit, it's clear that these items have worth.
The Exchange's customer base is just as varied as its clientele. Alison starts a running lists of the sorts of people they see. She explains, “Our customers are people who are sometimes very environmentally-minded, sometimes they’re looking for a cheaper way to make what they make and sometimes they just want to be surrounded by cool things... we get a lot of teachers, because they don’t have a lot of funding for the materials in their classrooms, and a lot of them come here because it’s cheaper, since they pay for a lot of their materials out of pocket.” She adds that because of Karyn's connections in the film world, even major motion pictures occasionally come through the doors. Referencing M. Night Shyamalan's Split, (Ed. Note: read Street's review of the film here) Alison gestures vaguely at the warehouse and explains that the movie found some materials for their set at The Resource Exchange.

Wandering through the store's neatly labeled corridors, it's easy to imagine that the sort of art that comes out of The Exchange is just as untraditional as its product base. But Alison actually points out that that’s not always the case (see some of the art here). “Sometimes the art is very salvaged, reclaimed-looking, sometimes it’s very refined... it all depends on what you find here, since we kind of have everything.” Alison explains that, contrary to popular belief, a lot of art materials, don’t have a single usage lifetime. For example, arts students, who are just practicing, often don’t need first-hand materials: “What a lot of customers do is they buy [used canvases], and they use them for school because they’re learning... they’re experimenting with new techniques, and it doesn’t make any sense really to buy a totally new canvas if you’re testing things out.” Laughing, Alison admits, “We don’t have a lot of waste here.”