Hidden only a couple blocks from Route 33, the Nelsonville Square Arts District is a haven for local arts and crafts in the foothills of Appalachia.
“Nelsonville, years and years and years ago, once coal left, you know, didn’t really know what they were gonna do next,” Brian Cosco, Marketing and Promotions Coordinator at Stuart’s Opera House, explains about the growth of Nelsonville’s art community. “This is all just part of all sorts of different people from all sorts of different areas trying to keep a town going, I think. And it’s not just the arts, it’s all that other stuff too.”

Nestled in the northwest corner of Athens County – an area that suffers an unemployment rate double the national average – is an unexpected haven for the arts.

With a population just under 6,000 residents, Nelsonville is primarily known by Ohio University students as a traffic stop on the way to Columbus.

Despite persistent poverty since the coal companies packed up and left, the arts manage to thrive in the small town. Hidden in plain sight just two blocks from Route 33, this niche of creativity helps sustain the town.

“Many downtowns have straight streets going right through them, and ours is inviting in that you can park and walk around, and nothing is too far from anything else” Mickey Brooks, owner of Fullbrook Café, 6 Public Square, said.

Small brick structures sit partially and fully vacant on the cobblestone roads, half-paved with blacktop in a cheap attempt to “fix” holes. The centerpiece is a three-tier metal fountain that works sporadically. But to the area’s residents and visitors, the worn down beauty of the Square is a cornerstone to its charm.
“Artists find places of beauty, and this is a place of beauty.”

“After living here for awhile, you could start to see the decline just like other small towns,” Brooks said. “And then, about 10 years ago, we started to have a resurgence. Artists find places of beauty, and this is a place of beauty.”

Local artists can showcase their work in one of the galleries on the Square. New galleries open every month starting on the last Friday of the month.

These “Final Fridays” are based on the Gallery Hop in Columbus. During this time, new galleries open, shops stay open late and the road through the Square is closed for pedestrians and vendors. There is often music, food, crafts and gifts, as well as special seasonal activities.

Before the influx of artists, the Square was the main shopping center for Nelsonville. Pre-Walmart times allowed for a full street of open, local businesses – not a storefront was empty.

The galleries and craft stores that call the square their home bring customers from Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia regularly. For example, Randy and Melissa Miller, an older couple from Columbia, W.Va., drove up for a day to look for gifts.

“My wife likes antiques and older things,” Randy explains while Melissa enquired about the area.

As the couple walked out the door of The Plaid Butterfly, a gift shop specializing in herbal and scented products, owner Johanna Ansel resumed her work on her most recent batch of handmade soap.

“I was feeling tropical because the weather has been so crappy lately, so I made a batch of coconut,” Ansel says with a chuckle.

Another cornerstone of the Square is Stuart’s Opera House, a historic concert hall that has hosted community performances and brought national talent to the region since reopening in 1997.

“I sometimes hope that 100 years from now, someone’s dumb enough to work as hard as we do to preserve this place and can say, ‘Look at all the cool things they did back then,’” Koscho said.
Top Left: Hand made window decorations hang from the door of locally owned craft and gift store, Tish's Place.

Middle Left: Starbricks in the Square form the foundation for pedestrians.

Above: Brian Dieterle, right, examines the winning cup before leaving after judging the Starbrick Clay National Cup Show in the Starbrick Cooperative Art Gallery. The Cup Show was the gallery's fourth national show in the eleven years they have been open.

Bottom Left: Johanna Ansel, owner of the Plaid Butterfly Unique Gifts, ties tags on her homemade soap. "I really just love to make soap," she says about why soap is the only product she sells that she makes.