

OAKLAND ART MURMUR:

EAST BAY'S FREE-SPIRITED ART SCENE

Reactions to Oakland's Art Murmur, the monthly First Friday art strolls involving some two dozen commercial and non-profit galleries, are as subjective as reactions to the wide range of art on display. Ranging from casual works embodying the popular do-it-yourself/recycling aesthetic to traditional *objets d'art* in traditional media (albeit deconstructed or recontextualized) or even mixed media employing the newest technology, the art proves once again that Northern California is nothing if not eclectic. Gubernatorial candidate Jerry Brown, who lives on Art Murmur's main drag, Telegraph Avenue, said, during his mayoral tenure, "A great city is really an aggregation of people—a successful city depends on its people, their creativity, their vitality. We are seeing that vital creativity flourish here. It's dynamic, it's exciting, and I think it really defines Oakland as an important metropolis." Other visitors to the Murmur's youthful street parties, can be more sardonic, scoffing at the "hipster hajj [pilgrimage],"

"hipster meat market," or "sea of skinny jeans, plaid shirts and ironic facial hair." Let's agree to disagree: the Art Murmur has been a cultural blessing to Oakland, attracting hundreds of celebrants and, accordingly, media attention from even *The New York Times*; it also reflects the current jumbled state of contemporary art, entwined with fashion, shopping, entertainment, and consumerist spectacle.

Art Murmur began several years ago on a humbler note. In early 2003, Nicole Neditch and Jen Loy, proprietors of Mama Buzz Cafe (previously Papa Buzz) and literary magazine publishers, started featuring work by local artists in their cafe on Telegraph Avenue near 23rd Street. The run-down area known as Uptown or Koreatown was one of many areas attracting artists forced from San Francisco by high dotcom-boom rents, and new artist-run spaces like 21 Grand, Ego Park and Rock Paper Scissors soon joined Mama Buzz in hosting openings on First Fridays. Neditch: "Around November of '05, I received an e-mail from Derek Weisberg [founder, with Mike Simpson] of the newly opened Boontling Gallery ... about how to drive more people to our collective openings." Weisberg recalls: "Mike Simpson, John [Casey], Theo [Auer] and myself went and looked at art together a lot, and the idea of a communal gallery walk in Oakland came up while we were all out "arting." Neditch again: "I hosted a meeting at Mama Buzz, and representatives of Boontling, Ego Park, 21 Grand, Rock Paper Scissors, 33 Grand and Auto 3321



Photo: DeWitt Cheng

Gallery showed up ... we decided ... to pool our resources and do some collective advertising."

The resulting newspaper ad, website and handmade Boontling postcards worked. "We were used to getting rather good (we thought) crowds of a hundred to two hundred people, ... but were blown away when ... we received over twice the amount of people. By the summer of '06, there were easily a thousand people circling the neighborhood." Rowan Morrison Gallery's Pete Narangkar remembers: "As far as I know, "Art Murmur" was conceived by Derek Weisberg (of Boontling), Alex Munn (of 33 Grand), and John Casey in the winter of 2005. It officially launched with eight or nine galleries in January of 2006." Some of these galleries folded during the next few years due to rent increases or changing career plans; Auto 3321, Boontling, Liminal, Magnolia, Papa Buzz, and 33 Grand were lovingly remembered in a 2008 show entitled "Resurrection: the Dead Space Show" at Adam Hatch's LoBot Gallery; and others, like Front Gallery, Industrielle, Esteban Sabar Gallery, Fort, Well Space, Red Door, and Blankspace have likewise vanished, or, like Maniac Gallery, moved, to be replaced by yet newer venues, as the area continues growing as a cultural mecca and nightlife hotspot.

Major credit goes to the artists' grit and determination, but the City of Oakland has helped. Jasmine Moorhead, director of the new Krowwork, awards kudos to Oakland's Tenant Improvement Program, which awards matching funds for redevelopment in the historic downtown buildings once used for light industry: "This directed funding has been instrumental in building up this neighborhood, and I think should serve as a model nationwide." Neditch praises City Council member Nancy Nadel for her efforts, while Kerri Johnson, former director of Blankspace Gallery, now working for regional artists with Neditch and Art Consultant Brook Baird at the Bay Area Visual Arts Network (BayVAN) and the Branch Gallery, praises the Cultural Arts and Marketing Department as "always ... supportive ... [recognizing] the potential of the arts as a positive marketing tool for the City as a whole."

Today some twenty-four galleries participate in the Art Murmur. With Vessel Gallery and Mercury 20 Gallery relocating to the 25th Street block that now houses Oakopolis; new spaces like Krowwork, Macarthur B Arthur, Royal NoneSuch Gallery, Slate Art and Design, Smokey's Tangle, Studio Quercus, WE Artspace and Warehouse 416; and a redesigned, enlarged versions of Chandra Cerrito Contemporary, Compound Gallery, Kuhl Art and the Oakland Museum of California reopening, the vitality of the East Bay art community—with Art Murmur only its most publicized part—seems assured. Cerrito notes: "There is a palpable sense of enthusiasm and energy surrounding Oakland Art Murmur and the Oakland art scene in general. The immediate community as well as the City of Oakland seem to have a real appreciation for what the galleries and the arts are contributing to the city. As a small part of this, I feel like I am actually helping to make a difference—beautifying storefronts; activating streets



TOP TO BOTTOM:
ART MURMUR OPENING FOR KANA TANAKA
AT CHANDRA CERRITO CONTEMPORARY GALLERY

INTERIOR VIEW OF BAYVAN / BRANCH GALLERY

PROJECTION ROOM AT KROWWORK GALLERY

STREET VIEW OF SLATE GALLERY
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE GALLERIES



with people interested in art, creativity, and just coming together to enjoy themselves; helping build personal connections among community residents as well as between Oakland locals and those from outside the city; putting Oakland on the map for something other than crime rates.”

Yet there are challenges: the economic and cultural factors that created the scene continue to affect it. Joell Jones of Oakopolis praises the Murmur’s social role in providing inspiration and meaning to a populace disenchanted with public life, but discerns the familiar pattern of artists reclaiming blighted areas only to be priced out by rising rents: “There have been major shifts in the neighborhood during the three years we have been here. Slow, but steady gentrification. High end restaurants, condos, music venues refurbished ... all seem to have filled up immediately, as if the people were waiting for them ... or they filled a vacuum.” Another gallerist believes that some artists see commercial galleries as the enemy: “Many Art Murmur gallerists, artists, and participants are very locally focused. They are not really interested in Oakland becoming a regional or national art market. They just want to do their cool thing for one other, which is too bad because the serious collectors ... go to shop in San Francisco or LA. Then the artists wonder why they are all struggling financially.”

Cerrito sees the Murmur more optimistically, as entering a phase of increased professionalism and economic viability. Weisberg concurs: “Some of Art Murmur’s strengths are also our weaknesses; i.e., it can be too open or free (I mean in standards of art or presentation), too DIY, too slapped-together.” Its strengths, however, “lie in its diversity, ranging from movies projected onto the wall, to local craft people, vendors and hot dog guys, to open art galleries. It is a real mix ... [and] the mix is what keeps it fresh.” Reconciling the anarchic outsider spirit with the business of art will be Oakland’s challenge, and, if successful, its triumph and legacy.

—DEWITT CHENG

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
“LIL TUFFY” POSTER SHOW AT KUHL FRAMES + ART GALLERY

HISTORICAL REFERENCE PHOTOGRAPH OF
THE NEW ARTISANS ON 25TH DEVELOPMENT

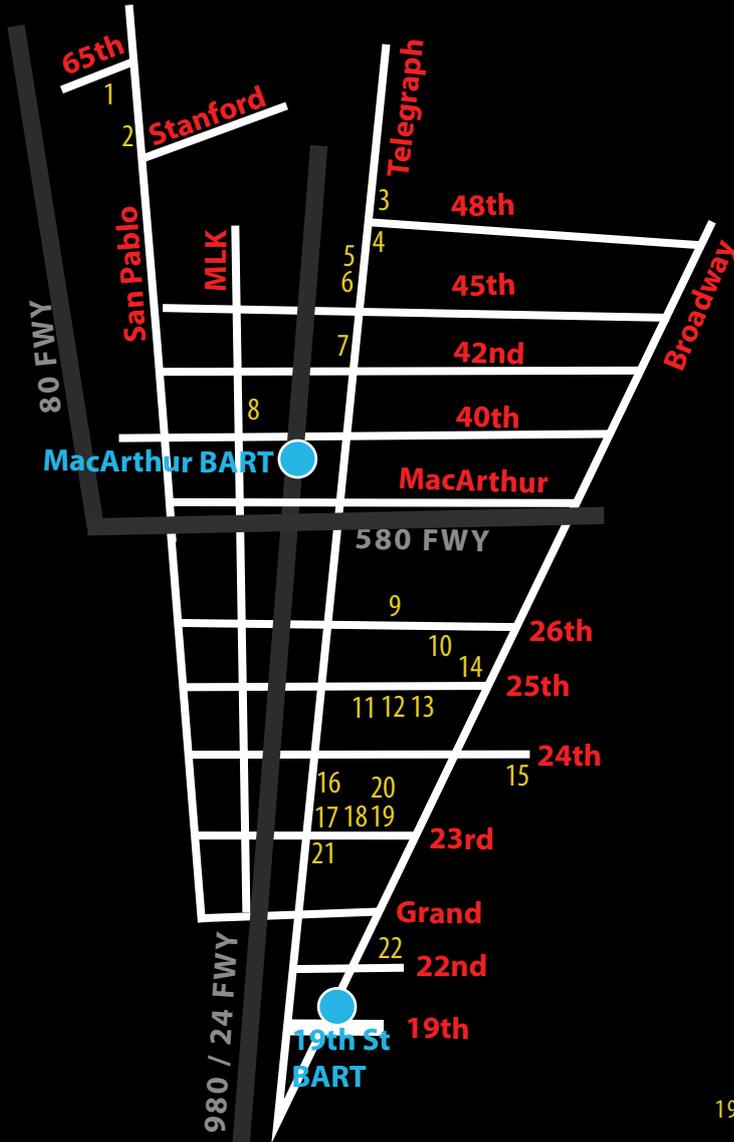
JOHANSSON PROJECTS INSTALLATION BY PAUL HAYES
PHOTO: COURTESY OF TARA SPAULTY

INTERIOR VIEW OF VESSEL GALLERY
LOCATED AT ARTISANS ON 25TH



GALLERIES OF THE

Oakland ART MURMUR



- 1 **COMPOUND GALLERY** 1167 65th St
thecompundgallery.com Th-Su 12-6
- 2 **FORTHRITE GALLERY** 5857 San Pablo
forthriteprinting.com by appt
- 3 **DESA ARTS** 4810 Telegraph
desaarts.com W-F 11-6, Sa 12-6, Su 12-5
- 4 **SLATE GALLERY** 4770 Telegraph
slateartanddesign.com Th-Sa 12-5
- 5 **SMOKEY'S TANGLE** 4709 Telegraph
smokeystangle.com by appt
- 6 **4707 GALLERY** 4707 Telegraph
4707telegraph.wordpress.com by appt
- 7 **ROYAL NONESUCH GALLERY** 4231 Telegraph
royalnoneschgalleries.com Sa-Su 1-4
- 8 **MACARTHUR BARTHUR** 4030 MLK Way
kevinclarke.com/projects/macarthur-b-arthur Su 1-6
- 9 **WAREHOUSE 416** 416 26th St
warehouse416.com Th-F 1-5
- 10 **STUDIO QUERCUS** 358 26th St
studioquercus.com by appt
- 11 **MERCURY 20** 475 25th St
mercurytwenty.com Th-Sa 12-6
- 12 **VESSEL GALLERY** 471 25th St
vessel-gallery.com Tu-Sa 11-6
- 13 **OAKOPOLIS/THE MOON** 447 25th St
oakopolis.org - Sa 2-5
- 14 **21 GRAND** 416 26th St
21grand.org Th 4-8, F 4-6, Sa-Su 2-6
- 15 **CREATIVE GROWTH** 355 24th St
creativegrowth.org M-F 11-4:30
- 16 **BUZZ GALLERY** 2316 Telegraph
mamabuzzcafe.com M-Th 7a-9p, F 7a-10p, Sa 8a-10p, Su 8a-9p
- 17 **JOHANSSON PROJECTS** 2300 Telegraph
johanssonprojects.com Th-F 12-6, Sa 11-5
- 18 **HATCH GALLERY** 492 23rd St
hatchgallery.org W-Sa 4-8
- 19 **CHANDRA CERRITO CONTEMPORARY** 480 23rd St (front)
chandracerrito.com F 2-6, Sa 1-5
- 20 **KROWSWORK GALLERY** 480 23rd St (side)
krowswork.com F 4-7, Sa 1-5, Su 2-4
- 21 **ROCK PAPER SCISSORS** 2278 Telegraph
rpscollective.com W-Su 12-7
- 22 **KUHL FRAMES + ART** 412 22nd St
kuhlframes.com M-F 10:30-6, Sa 11-4

THE OAKLAND ART MURMUR ART WALK IS EVERY FIRST FRIDAY 6-9

www.oaklandartmurmur.com

East Bay Open Studios: Doors Wide Open

While Art Murrur has brought new attention and larger audiences to Oakland, there are many artists, galleries, nonprofit venues and arts organizations—not Murrur-affiliated, for geographical or other reasons—that have helped keep the East Bay art scene vital and growing over the years. Foremost among these is Pro Arts, located in downtown Oakland, in the former Oakland Art Gallery site on Frank H. Ogawa Plaza. Founded in 1974, this arts-advocacy nonprofit mounts art exhibitions, trains young artists (Youth Fellows), sponsors East Bay Open Studios, and serves as an information clearinghouse for a local art community numbering tens of thousands—an essential function in these days of budget crisis caused by a weak economy. According to Executive Director Margo Dunlap, East Bay Open Studios generates almost a half million dollars' worth of sales every year, and East Bay non-profit arts organizations generate over \$200 million annually in direct economic activity; disproportionate cuts in civic arts funding would therefore appear to be shortsighted, at best, sabotaging what progress has been made in developing the Bay Area as an art and culture hub.

Pro Arts is probably best known, however, as the sponsor, for the past thirty years, of East Bay Open Studios (EBOS) a fixture in the noncommercial sector of the local art economy. While EBOS is a bit younger than San Francisco's Open Studios program, and smaller in scale, it has proved to be as influential as its trans-Bay peer: for example, Pro Arts' salon-style hanging of participating artists' work, the "live archive," is thought to have set the national example for preview exhibitions.

This year's East Bay Open Studios takes place on the weekends of June 5-6 and 12-13. Four hundred sixty Alameda and Contra Costa County artists in fourteen cities will engage in the annual rites (The Cleaning of the Studio, The Setting Out the Noshes) and welcome the art-curious to their lofts, houses, apartments and garages in hopes of attracting the art gods', or merely art angels', beneficence once again.

And visitors (some 55,000 in 2009, even at the economy's nadir) will be able to meet artists on their own turf, live, unplugged and unmediated, in a one-to-one exchange that's rare in commercial galleries, whatever their other advantages may be. For experienced art buyers, it's an opportunity to spot and support young talent (and snag some bargains), or to discover an unknown genius, perhaps; for novice buyers, it's an opportunity to develop a critical "eye" while enjoying the social scene in unthreatening, user-friendly surroundings.

Dunlap points out that Art Murrur, despite its indisputable role in bringing mainstream buzz to Oakland, is "the new kid on the block," with a high turnover rate, and she prefers to look at the scene in the long term, through a wide-angle lens: "There's such a strong arts community here that's been here, that's diverse and representative of Oakland, that's been thriving for decades." Open Studios grants access to the de-facto noncommercial, non-glitzy, grassroots sector of the art community (that would, of course, be grateful for feedback, dialogue, and financial support). The recession, by the way, has had mixed results on artists. David Huff, Exhibitions and Programs Coordinator, notes that he's seeing two new trends: more "gritty, industrialized painting," somewhat evocative of work created in the Depression by WPA (Works Progress Administration) artists; and larger pieces, built in newly available and affordable storefronts, that might not have been created during the boom years because the galleries considered them hard-sells.

For more information, pick up one of the *Directory of East Bay Arts* in May at Pro Arts (<http://www.proartsgallery.org/ebos/index.php>), 150 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, entrance at 199 Kahn's Alley. With profiles of participating artists and maps to their studios, the glossy, nicely printed magazine is indispensable for EBOS rounds. An online art gallery for 2010, with artists sorted by city and media, is already available (at http://db.proartsgallery.org/ebosGallery_10.php). This year's "Preview Exhibition" will be shown at Berkeley Art Center and Richmond Art Center as well as at Pro Arts.

—DEWITT CHENG

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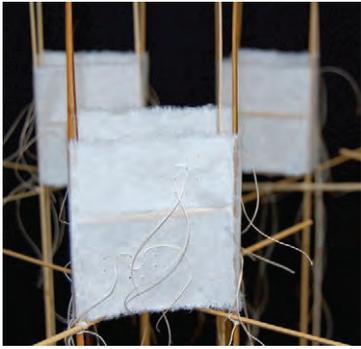
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to the right: Jessalyn Haggenjos, *Free Style Rock Balance*, 2009, enamel on panel, 47" x 54" - On display now through June 5th

branch gallery

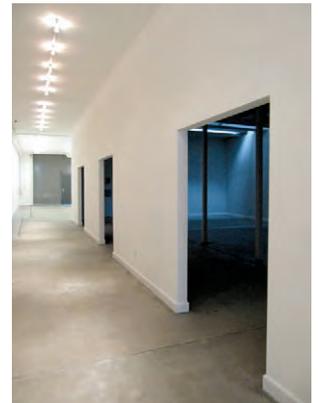
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THRU JUNE 19

WHAT: The exhibition, *Ansel Adams: Landscape and Light*, brings together historic black-and-white photographs including many of Adams' best-known and loved images taken during the 1920s through the 1960s as well as a selection of monumental and oversized prints.

WHERE: Gerald Peters Gallery, Santa Fe, NM
INFO: www.gpgallery.com

MAY 8 – JUNE 5

WHAT: New large-scale paintings by Ed Moses will be presented in simultaneous shows at Frank Lloyd Gallery and Greenfield Sacks Gallery.

WHERE: Greenfield Sacks Gallery and Frank Lloyd Gallery, Bergamot Station, Santa Monica, CA
INFO: www.greenfieldsacks.com, www.franklloyd.com



MAY 2 – JUNE 5

WHAT: Vessel Gallery inaugurates its new space with "A Place In-Between: Sculptures and Drawings" by Cyrus Tilton. Oakland-based Tilton uses materials that reflect his postindustrial surroundings. Combining expressive strokes with precise detail, he creates surreal, unexpected forms. Included in this exhibition are several kinetic works that invite audience interaction.

WHERE: Vessel Gallery, Oakland, CA
INFO: www.vessel-gallery.com



MAY 27 – JULY 17

WHAT: *If Only...* a solo installation by Rune Olsen featuring a maze of life-sized sculptures of children on leashes crisscrossing and obstructing the gallery space. Blurring the line between animals and humanity, control and submission, his kid creations tethered by their leashes are simultaneously humorous and confrontational.

WHERE: Johansson Projects, Oakland, CA
INFO: www.johanssonprojects.com



MAY 19 – JUNE 26

WHAT: William Wiley will be at the Sylvia White Gallery in Ventura, Friday, May 28, 5-7pm, for a book signing in conjunction with his retrospective exhibition "What's it all Mean?" at the Smithsonian and Berkeley Art Museum. A survey of Wiley prints will concurrently be on view at the gallery.

WHERE: Sylvia White Gallery, Ventura, CA
INFO: www.artadvice.com

JUNE 4 – JULY 24

WHAT: Keira Kotler: *Stillness*. For over a decade, Keira Kotler has explored luminosity and the resonance of color through reductive paintings, photographs, prints and videos. Stemming from an interest in time and sensory perception, the work is an invitation to pause and turn inward.

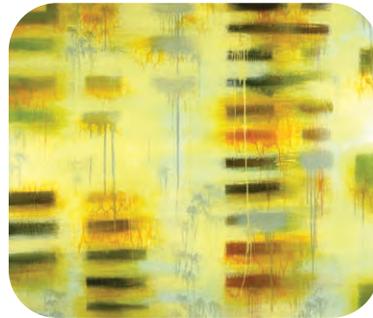
WHERE: Chandra Cerrito Contemporary, Oakland, CA
INFO: www.chandracerrito.com



MAY 28 – JUNE 26

WHAT: Carol Lefkowitz explores the delicate balance between structure and chaos in this series of large abstract paintings. Working with a specific palette derived from sky, sun, and leaves, she paints in thin layers of oil, creating fields of color that start out as studies of reflections in water and quickly become monumental structures of their own.

WHERE: Slate Art & Design, Oakland, CA
INFO: www.slateartanddesign.com



JUNE 19 – JULY 24

WHAT: The work of over 40 artists created from the debris gathered from the Deukmejian Wilderness Park after the devastating Station Fire of August 2009. Through this exhibition to benefit the park, ART from the ashes and the Glendale Parks & Open Space Foundation hope to inspire the community and share works of art that transcend their original form.

WHERE: ART from the Ashes Gallery, Glendale, CA
INFO: www.artfromtheashes.org

