



Snapshots and a Map of Mission Art Galleries

By Joe Rivano Barros
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Though the Mission is a hub of arts in a city already known for its strong cultural scene, it's no surprise that art galleries – to say nothing of artists themselves – often struggle to stay solvent in this boom town.

Galleries address these concerns in different ways. Precita Eyes is fully involved in the neighborhood, spearheading a mural project called “Walls of Respect,” while Kadist stays above water by employing its strong international connections. FFDG owner Rachel Ralph laments the lack of solidarity between galleries, while Park Life employee Marina Luz believes there's a fair amount of interconnection. And the Catharine Clark Gallery

has helped spearhead a movement to make Dogpatch, Potrero Hill, and the Mission an arts corridor by the name of DoReMi.

Each has its own approach and opinions, but all are still showcasing their art. Here are what some galleries in the Mission are up to, now and in the future.

Catherine Clark Gallery

On the border between the Mission and Potrero Hill, the Catharine Clark Gallery is in the midst of a movement seeking to establish a new arts mecca called DoReMi, which stands for Dogpatch, Potrero Hill, and the Mission.

“A number of galleries have moved to the area between Dogpatch and the Mission in the last two or three years as a result of the changing economic landscape of San Francisco's downtown area” — the previous center of the arts world — “and with a critical mass of arts organizations, we thought it would be interesting to brand the area as an arts corridor,” said Catharine Clark, owner of her namesake gallery and one of the originators of the DoReMi dream.

The gallery is one of a handful clustered in an industrial area on Utah Street between 15th and 16th. Along with the many galleries in Mission proper and a planned “arts oasis” in the Dogpatch, these galleries will form the DoReMi arts neighborhood, which already has a Facebook page and released a map earlier this month.



Artillery boasts a good amount of visual art for an apparel gallery. Photo by Joe Rivano Barros.

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The project has involved meetings, discussions, and outreach by many members of the arts community interested in finding a solution to the perennial problem of gallery survival in San Francisco. And it's drawing interest. "Everyday there's somebody who reaches out and says 'Hey, I want to know more about this and get involved,'" Clark said.

"It's a labor of love and a little rag tag to that end," she added. "But I think it's beneficial to have a primal experience of what art is, and that's getting people here to see artwork. If I can't do that, it's just vanity to have these big spaces on the wall."

Southern Exposure



Artist Bernie Lubell (in the red t-shirt) experimenting with a frame for a dirigible. Photo by Joe Rivano Barros.

Southern Exposure opened an exhibit called "Up in the Air" on Saturday, June 13, that invites gallery-goers to help artist Bernie Lubell build and fly an airship, almost from scratch.

"I have the parts, I have an idea — we'll see how it goes," Lubell said. "I thought it might be fun to get people involved in a workshop, but we don't know how it's going to work out."

The idea is to be as open-ended and exploratory as possible. Visitors will be able to join a workshop on Saturday the 20th, where Lubell will lead a session for people to draw and then build miniature air machines with "pulleys, gears, levers" and other odds-and-ends in the gallery. Or they can drop in Tuesday to Friday from 12-6 p.m. to contribute what they can to the main exhibit: a large wooden dirigible in the middle of the gallery.

Regarding the inspiration for the exhibit, Lubell says it's metaphorical.

“It’s because my life is up in the air. It’s mostly about the metaphor, but [airships] are fabulous things,” he said, before launching into the history of a local 1869 airship, the first unmanned dirigible to fly on its own in the United States.

Lubell had his first solo show at Southern Exposure back in 1984, according to Lisa Martin, the gallery’s communication director, who described him as an “amazing local artist” SoEx was happy to feature many years later. A closing reception for the exhibit will take place June 26 from 6-8 p.m.

Precita Eyes

Not strictly an art gallery, Precita Eyes is in the midst of its “Walls of Respect” project, four youth murals around the Mission funded by the California Arts Council under its Creative California Communities Program to the tune of some \$34,000. The murals each have different artists, but youth volunteers in their late teens and early 20s will contribute to all of them.

The mural at the Children’s Mini Park on 24th Street was the first of the project. Originally painted in 1988 by Tirso Araiza, Precita Eyes helped to restore it under this project, according to Precita Eyes tour guide Jorge Morell.

The second is the still unfinished mural at Philz Coffee, which replaces the frequently vandalized “Materialistic Displacement” that used to adorn the coffee shop’s wall. The new mural will feature Mission staples, including El Tecolote, various musicians, and a Philz coffee cup.

The third and fourth are still being ironed out, but will be located at the House of Brakes (below the Carnival mural restored last year) and the Brava Theater, respectively, the latter done in collaboration with local non-profit Mission Girls.

Alley Cat Books

Since opening in 2011, Alley Cat Books has had a small gallery in the back of the store, used for displaying a biweekly (or fortnightly, for the vocabulary aficionados) exhibit curated by owner Kate Rosenberg. The space is multi-use, frequently hosting classes, reading groups, film screenings, and even writers-in-residence.

“It’s been wildly successful,” said Jason Mull, who’s been working at Alley Cat since the beginning of the year. “Especially in the last few months. Across the board, it’s positive.” He added that the gallery is booked through to the fall, but people can apply now to have their art shown after the summer.

The Alley Cat gallery is currently displaying photography by Jim Burnett, who prints his photos on vellum paper, giving his images a rippling quality. His shots are stills of landscapes or ordinary objects — two bicycles leaning on a wall, a graffitied alley, a desert motel sign — which he calls “a straightforward documentary style.”



Some of Jim Burnett’s documentary-like photos, shot throughout the United States, currently on display at Alley Cat Books. Photo by Joe Rivano Barros.

Ratio 3

Ratio 3, the nondescript black-on-the-outside, white-on-the-inside gallery on Mission and 24th, opened “Gay Semiotics” on May 22. The exhibit is a collection of photos taken by Hal Fischer in 1977 of gay men in the Castro, overlaid with textual explanations of “Dominance” and “Amyl Nitrate,” among other things.

The collection is a “snapshot of a culture that doesn’t really exist anymore,” explained Associate Director Theo Elliot. Elliot says gay culture was necessarily “more subversive” and “underground” at the time and that Fischer attempted to capture what he saw in photos and describe it in words, mixing the visual medium with language in a unique way.

The heart of the exhibit, displayed in its own side room, is a recreation of a billboard done by Fischer in 1979 called “A Salesman.” The billboard shows a naked man lying on a bed, a black bar covering his eyes and a phone number, 767-2676, below him. When called, the number would simply announce the time, thus turning the entire concept of billboard ads on their head, according to Elliot.

“Gay Semiotics” will remain at Ratio 3 until June 27.

Mission: Comics and Art

Mission: Comics and Art has a small space in the back of the store currently displaying a wall of feminist weapons — pink axes, a buttoned war vest, and nerf guns that shoot tampon bullets. All the artwork is by the Degenderettes, a “queer biker gang” that have a “performance art aspect,” according to the store’s owner Leef Smith.

During the exhibit’s opening reception, the Degenderettes took a sledgehammer to a urinal they had installed in the shop, covering the floor with enamel pieces that are now part of the exhibit, alongside tampons shot from an arsenal of pink nerf guns.

Smith says he changes exhibits once a month but that they usually have to do with comic books. (One of the members of the Degenderettes is working on a queer comic book.)



Ratio3 boasts an impressively large gallery space, somewhat under-utilized by the current exhibit’s small photographs. Photo by Joe Rivano Barros.



Pieces of the smashed-up urinal still decorate the gallery space, and an arsenal of pink tampon-shooting Nerf guns (along with other assorted weaponry) decorates a side wall. Photo by Joe Rivano Barros.

“Some people come in specifically for the art shows,” he said. “But it’s been harder for galleries around here — a lot have closed. Five years ago this was more of an artist community.”

Smith laments this fact, mentioning that he has personal friends in the artist community but no business relationship with other galleries. When asked, he notes that his exhibits seldom have any direct connection to the Mission, but might have some resonance.

“The last show was called ‘Dealing with It,’” he said. “So that definitely had some neighborhood connections.”

FFDG

Rachel Ralph just became owner and director of FFDG at the beginning of the year, and she’s adamant about featuring local artists.

“I’m really focused on showing local people. The more galleries can show and support local artists, the better for both them and us,” she says, noting that not too many Mission galleries do the same. “Except Park Life. Park Life does a good job.”

She’s not critical, but does want art galleries in the Mission to have more solidarity.

“I wish there was more a community. It’s not cohesive in any way,” she says. “The art scene here is incredible, okay, but we galleries are all isolated.” She admits, however, that the many galleries “work in a lot of different veins” and that there’s not necessarily common ground. Still, she frequently visits other galleries and “tries to go to every exhibit.”

And for a new owner, she’s cautious but optimistic.

“I wouldn’t say I’m thriving,” Ralph admits, laughing. She works a second job while supervising the gallery and says all the artists she works with do the same.

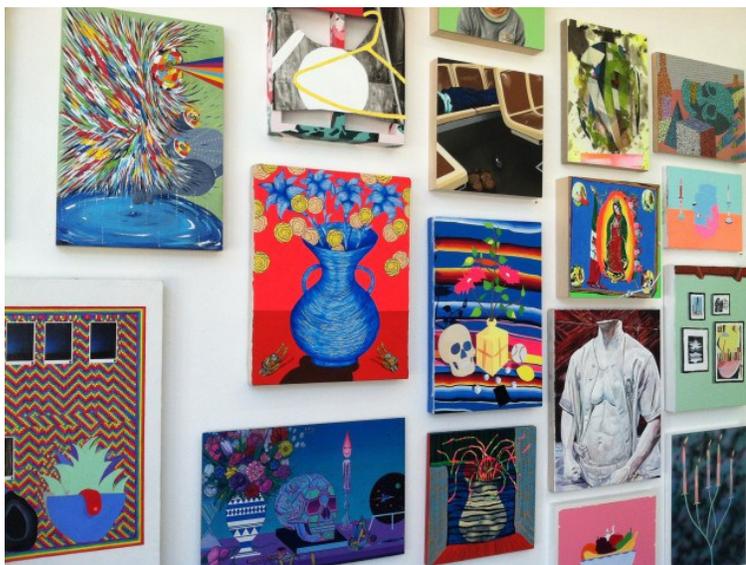
Park Life

Park Life, which has a sister retail store in the Inner Richmond and moved to the Mission in 2014, is displaying an exhibit of contemporary still life called “Jug Life” that brings together some 80 different artists, employee Marina Luz said.

“It’s pretty unusual for us, new for us, to have this many,” she added. “And they come from all over: New York, San Francisco, L.A. He [curator Andrew Schoultz] just got together a group with the theme of still life.”

Luz said that though Park Life ends up with a good amount of Bay Area artists, they don’t focus on local art and display “anything that catches the eye.”

Though the gallery is connected to the neighborhood in other ways. Luz said that different Mission galleries try to coordinate events and that there are a lot of mutual friends in the artist community.



Some of the artwork by the more than 80 artists currently on display at Park Life. Photo by Joe Rivano Barros.

“We’re all pretty linked,” she said.

Kadist

Kadist, a non-profit arts foundation with galleries in San Francisco and Paris, is in between exhibits at the moment, half-opened cardboard boxes dominating its large gallery space instead of the usual artwork.

Instead of delving into a specific exhibit, Assistant Director Heidi Rabben explains Kadist’s general aesthetic.

“We’re dedicated to international contemporary art,” explained Assistant Director Heidi Rabben. “We’re focused on the idea that contemporary artists are important to a progressive society.”

Though San Francisco is important to Kadist — and the “artistic activity” of the Mission especially so — the gallery does not focus on showcasing local art, opting instead for international collaborations with artists, museums, and galleries from around the globe. (Melbourne, Taiwan, Rome, and Guangzhou are all mentioned in our conversation.)

Alongside three or four exhibits a year, Kadist throws 20-30 events, many of which feature interesting happy hours.

“We’ve had a few art-minded bartenders” said Rabben. One created drinks “representative of the shapes in tantric paintings we were exhibiting,” while another focused on an Alcoholics Anonymous aphorism of the half-full, half-empty dichotomy: The drink had a large frozen ice block that filled the bottom half of the glass, with the alcohol resting entirely on top.

“We’ve had some cool cocktails over the years,” Rabben said.

Campfire

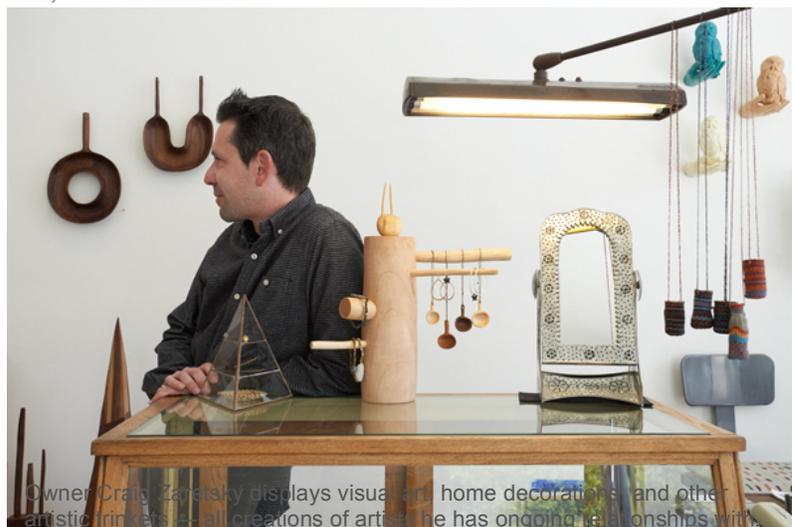
Craig Zaretsky, co-owner of Campfire Gallery with his wife Rachel Ybarra, repeats a refrain common to art galleries in the Mission: He loves working with and displaying local artists.

“It’s giving back to where I live, fostering relationships with people in the city I live,” he said. “I like cultivating an artist because I got help when I was a young artist and I know how much that means.”

But he acknowledges that small galleries like his are limited in the help



Kadist, the international non-profit arts foundation, has a large gallery space that dominates the entire block with its midnight blue facade. Photo by Joe Rivano Barros.



Owner Craig Zaretsky displays visual art, home decorations, and other artistic finds — all creations of artists he has ongoing relationships with.

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they can give to artists, and that one upside of tech moving into the Mission might be its purported support of the arts.

“I think these tech companies — it makes them look good to support local artists,” Zaretsky said. “They can throw money at it, whereas we can’t really support an artist.”

This doesn’t mean techies have any knowledge of art itself, however.

“I think it’s going to take a while to become more educated about art, to develop tastes,” he said of the Mission’s newest denizens. “It seems this younger generation views art as more experience-based, less of a transaction. People come in and take photos a lot and then leave without buying anything.”

Campfire opened an exhibit on the natural beauty of the American southwest called “Blue Skies” by Felicia Gabaldon and Larissa Grant on June 10.

Artillery

An apparel gallery with around a hundred artists, Artillery has an interesting requirement to join its cooperative: You must speak Spanish.

“We always want the community to feel welcome,” said Lucia Leal, an artist manning the counter. Communicating with people in the Mission in their native language is important to Artillery, Leal said, which has some 80 Bay Area artists in its collective and a strong focus on displaying local art.

“This is the concept of Artillery. We all make art here, we’re family, we’re friends,” Leal said. “We all make different things” — referencing the varied shoes, shirts, belts, stickers, and other garb sold in the store — “but we all help each other.”



Clothes, backpacks, belts, paintings, stickers — the original art of Artillery members is all on sale. Photo by Joe Rivano Barros

To that end, the store is moving toward removing its collections of Toms and Adidas shoes, the last remnants of retail apparel not created by member artists.

“We’d rather make this a place that’s a family, not some corporation,” Leal said.

Though not everyone understands that. Leal said that some people enter the store and think it’s a collection of hipster clothing. Picking up a bracelet made in Colombia, she laments the fact that some can’t recognize Native American designs and assume the worst, but adds that on the whole their reception in the neighborhood has been positive.

“People come in and tell us they’re really happy with what we’re doing,” she said.