

# art happens

BY ANNAMARIA STEPHENS

THE GREAT DOWNTOWN GALLERY UPRISING

San Diego's art scene is not nearly as famous as its scenic coastline, but a new vanguard of gutsy gallerists is aiming to change that.



On the corner of Kalmia Street and Kettner Boulevard in Little Italy, a pair of neighboring galleries embodies the two distinct realities of San Diego's downtown art scene: the established and the eager-to-succeed.

At the zinc-sided Scott White Contemporary, an airy former warehouse, veteran dealer Scott White presides over his museum-quality collection with three decades of know-how. Next door at Jett Gallery—named for its location under the flight path and matte-black exterior—artist Joey Vaiasuso showcases his own minimalist sculptures and furniture, along with a few other San Diego artists who share a similar aesthetic.

White spent a decade in La Jolla before moving to Little Italy, where he waited out a five-year lease at a nearby building before settling into his stylish new digs in 2008. “We like being part of the downtown excitement,” he says. “It’s happening here.”

Despite his neighborhood's buzz-worthy appeal, White points out that even during the most robust economic times, area gallerists must fight hard to hang in there.

“San Diego is not a gallery-oriented destination for San Diegans, or for tourists for that matter. This is a city that people visit for the outdoors—for golf, the beach, what have you. They are not here for art. Unfortunately, we don't get a lot of foot traffic, which I think we should, because we have such a great nucleus.”

White attributes his longevity and success to his gallery's integrity, and to his globe-spanning clientele, which he's built up over the years. But if his summation of San Diego's art scene seems somewhat glum, a new breed of younger gallerists have found creative new ways to challenge that status quo.

For Vaiasuso, White's neighbor, that means using a gallery space as a marketing tool for himself, a model he developed a couple of years ago at his now-defunct Hillcrest storefront WoodFX. He opened Jett, just a couple of blocks from his warehouse workshop, in late 2008.

“My gallery isn't your conventional gallery,” the sculptor explains. “Mainly because I'm an artist-run gallery, so I'm showing my own work. I'm concerned about sales, but I'm not as concerned about sales as someone who is a dealer and has to sell other peoples' art all the time to make money.”

The gallery, says Vaiasuso, brings in a lot of new contacts and clients for his primary business, which is custom sculpture and furniture pieces. He says his strategy is catching on. “I've talked to a lot of artists who are more into showing their own work rather than going out and trying to hustle all the galleries and do shows.”

Another upside? When his pieces do sell, Vaiasuso keeps every dime. Because of that, he doesn't mark up his work like most artists must when showing in commission-based galleries. That's a bonus for potential buyers, too.

A few miles from Little Italy in Barrio Logan, on the outskirts of downtown, married duo Greg and Amy Brotherton run a more conventional gallery with an unusual twist. The two have filled an intriguing artistic niche, populating their space with fantastical



©BJARNE G. JENSEN EXCEPT "MIGRAINE MACHINE" AND "AFTER WARHOL 2;" COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

pieces of the mechanical, science fiction and steam-punk variety.

The couple left behind careers in Hollywood—Greg in the commercial arts, Amy in marketing and PR—to open Device Gallery, originally located in La Jolla. “We just jumped right in,” admits Amy, who runs the day-to-day operations. “We worked out all the kinks along the way.”

In May of 2009, less than a year after first launching, Device relocated to Glashaus, an artist and design collective built out of an old glass factory by owners Greg Brotherton and Matt Devine, both sculptors. The space, an assortment of artist workspaces that complements the building's stunning old bones, stopped visitors in their tracks during Glashaus' debut fête.

The Brothertons couldn't have asked for a better backdrop to *It Moved*, Device Gallery's grand reopening, which featured Greg's robotic-looking sculptures, cunningly welded from old car parts and other utilitarian ephemera, as well as kinetic works by Reuben Margolin and Nemo Gould.

Amy says she has sold most of the pieces in her husband's collection, as well as “a ton” of Gould and several of Mike Libbey's mind-boggling bugs, real preserved insects rejiggered with mechanical watch parts. Like White, she says Device relies more on a global clientele than walk-ins.

“We've sold to everyone from investment bankers to film directors. The people that we sell to are very Internet-savvy, and they don't have any problem buying online, which has been very beneficial.”

Another married couple, Sean and Stacy Kelley, are also relative newcomers to San Diego's art scene, but unlike the Brothertons, the two artists have made a significant impact without a permanent space to their name.

In 2007, the Kelleys joined forces with Jeff Faeth to form Sanctuary 143, a roving arts collective. Together they staged shows at galleries in Solana Beach and a former mortuary in San Clemente before heading back to San Diego in the fall of 2008 for *Reinventing the Wheel*.

They spent two months gearing up for that one-night event at The Logan, a warehouse space in Barrio Logan. More than 600 people attended *Reinventing*, which showcased bike art alongside pieces from a wide cross-section of artists and designers. It was one of the most talked-about shows of the year, as was *Conspire*, an early 2009 event at Community, a hip communal apartment building in Bankers Hill.

The Kelleys since have set out on their own as Set + Drift, but their values remain the same: Foster artistic community and forge new opportunities through friendship and networking. As for show-based sales? Not so high on their list of priorities.

“We hope that having this larger goal is actually more beneficial than just a painting sold,” explains Sean, citing the case of Acamonchi, a local artist who participated in *Reinventing*. The Kelleys introduced him to the owner of Community, who later commissioned Acamonchi to do several custom pieces for the building.

The shows and other projects also have turned up leads for the Kelleys—both are designers, Sean in graphics, Stacy in interiors—but both say they do it largely for the love.

“We both have really eclectic backgrounds,” says Stacy, “and these events have pulled us into various circles of other artists and designers. We can collaborate and create value out of that. What we're really trying to do is give other artists opportunities to be creative and to experiment. That's what inspires us. It would be hard to convert that to something purely financial.”

OPENING PAGE: MIGRAINE MACHINE BY KINETIC SCULPTOR/DEVICE GALLERY CO-OWNER GREG BROTHERTON.

THIS PAGE, TOP: STEEL SCULPTURES BY JETT GALLERY'S JOEY VAIASUSO; BOTTOM: DEVORAH SPERBER, WHOSE AFTER WARHOL 2 IS MADE FROM 2,524 SPOOLS OF THREAD, IS AMONG THE ARTISTS REPRESENTED BY SCOTT WHITE CONTEMPORARY ART.

