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At the Hamiltonian, a Treasury for Artists

Philanthropist's Fellowships Aim to Foster Commercial Success

By Jessica Dawson
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Washington artists, who's your daddy?

If you're an artist without a gallery, your benefactor could be a self-effacing and bespectacled man named Paul So.

When the 41-year-old So accepts you into his arts incubator program, you become a Hamiltonian Artist. You'll receive \$2,000 annually and the guarantee of one exhibition per year. So will keep you for two years, at which point you will be ejected from the nest whether you've secured gallery representation or not.

So is a tough-love kind of daddy.

The nonprofit Hamiltonian fellowship program (named after a printing company that once operated out of the U Street NW building that now houses the nonprofit and its exhibition space, Hamiltonian Gallery) announced its first 10 fellows earlier this year. Early in 2009, the organization will name 10 more. The gallery will carry a 20-fellow maximum at any given time. (Artists rotate out if they find a gallery during their tenure.)

Hamiltonian Artists install their exhibitions in the building's handsome 2,000-square-foot first-floor storefront adjacent to a liquor store and the Republic Gardens nightclub. The gallery's inaugural show features a trio of artists and hangs until Nov. 2.

Though a for-profit enterprise, Hamiltonian Gallery comes armed with a budget geared toward taking losses. So built four years of red ink into his spending plan because he was intent on buffering the space from financial ups and downs.

Nevertheless, So recognizes the imperative that his artists sell.

To succeed, he says, fellows "have to be seen as viable commercial artists." The Hamiltonian goal is to develop their artists' marketing savvy.

An emphasis on artists as capitalist entities has been the going template for the art world for some time. Of late, an MFA has been seen as an artist's most vital imprimatur. But even advanced degrees don't always prepare graduates to sell themselves.

"We're a steppingstone," says Hamiltonian Gallery Director Jacqueline Ionita, herself a recent graduate of the Corcoran's painting department. "We want our artists to move on."

This pragmatic approach includes a lecture series aimed at schooling fellows in the business side of their practice. So modeled the program on the postdoctoral fellowship he enjoyed while working on his PhD in

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physics. (A sometime painter, So has been a physics professor at George Mason University for more than a decade.)

The Hong Kong-born benefactor comes from a family of philanthropists. With his parents and brother, he has established scholarships at his alma mater, the math- and science-centered Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, Calif. among other good deeds. Hamiltonian is his first major move into arts philanthropy.

Hamiltonian Gallery's inaugural show presents its three-person exhibition model: An established artist acts as mentor and his work hangs alongside two fellows. Right now, New York -based multimedia artist Nao Matsumoto presides; fellows Ian MacLean Davis, from Maryland, and Virginia artist Bryan Rojsuontikul show next to him.

Walking in, it's clear who is the mentor and who is green. Matsumoto's exceptionally crafted pop objects have a wry humor and high production values. The fellows experiment with expanding notions of painting (Rojsuontikul sticks tape to canvas) and layered images culled from popular media (Davis).

Though Matsumoto is scheduled to critique the fellows' artworks, the gallery has yet to formalize mentor interaction. Hamiltonian hopes mentors will shape the young artists in the program, yet it remains unclear how. The current group didn't meet until its show's installation.

As for the exhibition itself, bright colors and a pop sensibility dominate. Rather than offer a coherent group show, the Hamiltonian model seems to be that of three small solo shows sharing a single gallery.

Though short-term questions linger, So is confident about his gallery's long-term sustainability. In hopes of securing his investment, he purchased the Hamiltonian building two years ago for \$1.3 million. Washington architecture firm Inscape Studio reconfigured the interior into four units, three of which So rents out. His strategy to guarantee stability, So says, was to think of Hamiltonian as a development project.

One of So's new tenants will be Project 4 gallery, which closes its final show at its Ninth and U digs tomorrow. Inscape principal Greg Kearley holds a stake in the gallery, which had been searching for a new space for some time. A deal was struck, and now the gallery holds a three-year lease for an upstairs, double-height space with north- and south-facing windows.

Project 4 will inaugurate its new space with the time-based work of Los Angeles artist Thomas Mueller on Nov. 8; Hamiltonian Gallery opens its next show the same night.

In the meantime, visitors have two days to catch the end of Brooklyn-based artist Michael Scoggins's quirky drawings show at the old Project 4. Fashioned to look like children's drawings on oversize sheaths of spiral-bound, three-ring notebook paper, the artworks' politically charged messages are softened by their earnest, childlike scrawl. Most are signed, as a child might, "MichaeL S."

Scoggins plays smartly with scale, offering a convincingly gargantuan doodle. Its size underscores its charm and offsets the stridency of Scoggins's agenda.

In one work, Scoggins writes "I'm the decider" more than 80 times on a single page. It's an amusing take on a much-lampooned bit of presidential discourse. If only real life were so funny.

Hamiltonian Gallery is at 1353 U St. NW; hours by appointment through end of October; 202-332-1116; show runs through Nov. 2. <http://www.hamiltoniangallery.com>.

Michael Scoggins at Project 4, 903 U St. NW, Wednesday-Friday 2 p.m.-6 p.m., Saturday noon-6 p.m.; 202-232-4340; closes tomorrow. <http://www.project4gallery.com>.

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