

# Swarm Gallery

Director

Interview: Gregory Ito



Photograph by Bonnie Chan

## **Tell us about your history before opening Swarm.**

Let's see. I opened it almost six years ago now. I have an undergraduate degree in Paleontology. I entered the museum world as an intern at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in D.C. I was then hired for a year to set up a digital archive program in the Mineral and Gems department. Prior to that I was doing research for my undergraduate thesis in Triassic biotomes, but don't ask me anything about that now! (laughs) I started doing black and white photography in college – while in the geology department – so I was pretty engaged in both science and art. When I went to the museum, I pretty much became obsessed with “the guts” of the institution, how it worked, what power did this massive cultural heritage keeper institution have? With my staff badge, I could sneak up to the restricted floors and open drawers and check out all the relics. I used to imagine the corollary histories of the skulls and bones in the human remains halls - should I really be saying all this? (laughs) It wasn't as morbid as it sounds. That building contained a major collection of *stuff*, detached from its history, waiting for someone to come and make sense of it all. I think that was my segue into the art world, more than working at a museum, I was wanting to pull things together, create narratives, make sense of things. I was interested in art, but I don't think I had completely said goodbye to the science field. So I decided to get a Masters degree in Museum Studies (at John F. Kennedy University) and see where my interests led under the museum umbrella. I studied collections management. The same week I started graduate school, I started working as an exhibition and program coordinator at Pro Arts, a nonprofit arts organization.

## **When did you open Swarm and what were some of your main reasons for opening a gallery?**

I opened the gallery in March of 2006. Since college I had envisioned creating a space – the form it took back then was more like an “art café.” I had close friends who were musicians

and dancers and chefs and winemakers and baristas. I imagined myself with them in a creative environment, making things and sharing things. We all disbursed after college, mostly to New York or Portland, a few of us came to the Bay Area – I'm actually from here, so I wanted to return. My primary interest was working with artists and curating exhibitions. I always enjoyed putting on events, or more specifically, pulling people together. I had no idea how perfect the space would be for events, but it really is. People love to hang out here. The studios adjacent to the gallery are occupied by working artists - mostly from Oakland and SF. It's awesome having the studio artists here - they benefit from being in a semi-public space with pedestrian traffic and the reception crowds, but also have their privacy when they want it.

## **I would like to discuss your curatorial duties. How is your program curated? Have you ever invited guest curators to Swarm?**

I've worked with guest curators, but not often. Marisa Olson juried a digital print show here a few years ago. Some collaborative shows have included Quorum, a San Francisco art collective, and about once a year I host short-term student shows from CCA. Those have been more or less curated by the students, and I'll help lay them out or whatever. But for the most part, I do all the curating. I represent fifteen artists, all of which I've developed relationships with over time. The structure of the program consists of gallery artists and affiliate artists. The gallery artists are the core group - I bring their work to art fairs and have on inventory online. I commit to do a solo or duo show every couple of years. I seek out the affiliates and invite them to show with a gallery artist or do an installation in the project space. Some of the affiliates I have worked with multiple times but don't necessarily represent. This model mixes things up a bit, broadens the scope of the program, creates flexibility. It's fun to find artists out there whose work relates to a gallery artist's work but is coming from a different perspective.

**It's interesting that you come from a Geology/Paleontology background. Do you feel your background has influenced your curating practice?**

Yeah, sure. I'm definitely drawn to work that has an environmental conscious; many of my artists like Sarah Smith, Joseph Smolinski, and Chris Sicat, have that man vs. nature thing. They approach their ideas uniquely and smartly. Sarah's kind of like a contemporary Romantic, with her gorgeous depiction of devastated and decomposing landscapes. Her work has moved in a slightly different direction lately, focusing on the decompositional element of nature that makes it so energetic. Joseph's work provides technological solutions to environmental travesties. So they are somewhat hopeful, but simultaneously point to a dark future. Most of the work I show is socially or politically-minded, but not overtly so. I appreciate work that has a message, but that doesn't attempt to address it directly. It's a little too formalized or thematic to be "in your face" about it. If an artist can successfully integrate a relevant issue, his unique perspective on it, present it in a relational way – the viewer "gets it", and it is stylistically and materially well executed, then that's a good piece of art.

**Can you talk about the Project Space and the reasons to dedicating it to video, sound and installation work?**

I initially conceptualized this space to show work that was Oakland-centric thematically, approached from various mediums, including social practice. I thought it would be somewhat of an ongoing study of this fine city. Turns out it was pretty limiting – I wanted to show more artists who didn't particularly want to relate to the geography or cultural landscape here. No big deal. It was experimental, like most things I do. With no lock-down on a theme, the project space is a dedicated space for video, sound, different types of site-specific installation. This past year we presented a sound program, *Building Steam*, curated by Jeff Eisenberg, Aaron Ximm and myself. We pulled in three project artists who did intimate or atmospheric sound installations in the project space, and two solo shows in the gallery – Lynn Koble from NY and SF-based artist Joshua Churchill, and got an Alternative Exposure grant for it. I think having a space dedicated to new media opened up a general receptivity to showing more of that art in the main space. I've been showing a lot more video and animation and sound, which has been great. I would show more of it if I could justify it financially (laughs).

**There has been an ongoing conversation about the separation between San Francisco and the East Bay. Can you talk about the two communities and your experience in Oakland?**

Before I opened my gallery, I spent some time going to the Luggage Store and places in the Mission, like Needles and Pens. I appreciate the art scene in San Francisco. It feels like it is its own bubble - in an incubator, not in an isolated kind of way. The cultures vary from space to space, and there is a wide variety of spaces on the spectrum from artist-run to the upper tier galleries. There are fewer spaces on that spectrum here in Oakland. There are only a tiny handful of commercial spaces, more collectives, some studio/gallery hybrid models. It's smaller-scale. Oakland has its own culture for sure - I see a lot of the "utopian punk" here - super resourceful and visionary young artists, designers, writers, musicians making things happen - not really sitting on their butts. Over the last year or more, Swarm has hosted a bunch of music shows. It's been a nice way to get people through the door. I know SF's art market isn't necessarily thriving, but there's also less of a market carved out for serious art buyers here. Remember that article in the *Times* a few years ago, "San Franbrooklyn"? I think it was measuring the parallels between the two cities, where the "creative class" can live and make money, real estate, stuff like that? When I was in Brooklyn - I was actually there when I read that article - many neighborhoods looked exactly like the Jack London area - condo development on every block, new shops and hoards of people moving from the "city." This area was experiencing its own hoards - on a much smaller scale, of course, but honestly I think the analogy is more hopeful than it is accurate. I can certainly appreciate it, but Oakland's more publicized reputation, like, the negative one, has kept some of the positive development that Brooklyn has enjoyed over the past decades from moving forward. That being said, this reputation is a major separation of San Francisco from the East Bay. I mean, outside the Bay Area, I would be taken more seriously saying I have a gallery in San Francisco than I would be saying I have a gallery in Oakland. If someone knows about the Oakland art scene at all, their associations are - "Oh yeah, that crazy art walk" or "Oh I've heard about the Oakland art Renaissance" or "What the hell are you doing with a gallery in Oakland?!" It's true. People perceive Oakland as a cool fantasy, the fringe, an edgy city, but not a serious art business city. When I met Ruth Braunstein for the first time, Catharine Clark introduced me as a gallery owner in Oakland. Ruth looked at me and said "Oakland? Good luck. You're gonna need it." So, according to the matron of the San Francisco gallery world, I've done something completely impossible and probably insane. But like I said, I've managed to carve out a business here - a small market of collectors, a great group of artists, an audience committed to the work I do; ongoing exhibits, occasional off-site projects - like curating window spaces and working with architects to put art in their buildings - the occasional recognition in the press (laughs). The recognition is a nice way to supplement my huge income (laughs).

**What can we look forward to at Swarm?**

Through February 19th, I have a two-person exhibit with new affiliate artists Jessalyn Aaland and Paul Morgan, who both Oakland-based. The show is called "Of Course Not," and features detailed collages and screen prints. I'm really excited about these two. In the spring and summer, I have two solo shows scheduled with gallery artists Masako Miki and Ethan Worden, with some surprises on the calendar.



Office Space gallery. Photograph by Bonnie Chan



Taro Hattori, Installation view of exhibition "V", 2009. Courtesy Swarm Gallery



Robin Johnston and Chelsea Pegram, Installation view of "INFLUX", 2010. Courtesy of Swarm Gallery



Lauren Woods, Inkblot Projective Test #3 (Birthing) From the (s)Port of San Francisco 2006 series. TRT: 3 minutes, video installation