



Apr 15, 2007 Public hasn't caught up with Oakland's buzzing art scene
Angela Woodall

OAKLAND -- In many ways, the Joyce Gordon Gallery on 14th Street is a reflection of Oakland's art scene, which has exploded in the past five years -- from Gordon's elegant gallery to the hip Esteban Sabar Gallery, scrappy Mama Buzz cafe and gallery or experimental Mercury 20 collective.

The art scene is "on the move. It's really coming up," said owner Joyce Gordon.

"Oakland is starting to sizzle," as local artist Cleo Villett put it.

But the buyers have yet to catch up -- making it hard for galleries and artists to survive in one of the most expensive areas in the country.

It has taken passion, commitment and sheer determination by Gordon to keep the doors of her fine art gallery open.

In part, it has been a struggle because she features artists who are more established and can command higher prices -- such as Raymond Saunders, who can command well more than

\$25,000 for a painting.

But the struggle also has to do with the nature of Oakland's art scene, which is in its infancy and has a long way to go before it can sustain itself.

At least 14 new galleries, 36 new cafes and restaurants, and 18 new nightclubs and bars have opened in the past five years. The Bay Area is home to numerous artists -- more per capita than any other U.S. metropolitan area, some claim.

The explosion that Gordon's studio was part of when it opened in 2003 was ignited by the once-monthly publication, Artmurmur.

It literally put the Oakland art scene on the map by creating a set route for art lovers to move from gallery to gallery, all keeping their doors open after hours once monthly.

The question is whether the scene will thrive despite the pressures that weigh on the arts in many American cities.

In Oakland, the need for artists to create venues for their work is partly behind the burgeoning art scene, said Oakland artist James Gayles, who has seen the scene change since he arrived from New York in 1979.

"Despite the energy and excitement surrounding the arts in Oakland, artists are having a hard time selling their work because people are not buying," said Gayles, who also is a commercial graphic artist on the staff of ANG Newspapers, parent company of the Oakland Tribune.

That complaint was echoed by many of his colleagues.

The venues exist to show art work, but "you just don't sell it," said Casey Jex Smith, a Utah native who moved from San Francisco to the East Bay two years ago.

The sluggish market also makes it hard for galleries like Gordon's to stay afloat.

Still, Gordon said she's optimistic.

"The more the public sees the art, the more they appreciate it -- in time that translates into financial support," Gordon said.

"People begin to pay just a little more attention. It's not enough yet, but it's a start," Gordon said.

"New markets need time to take hold and stabilize," said Samee Roberts, head of the city's Cultural Arts and Marketing agency.

Oakland is trying to kindle that process by creating an arts and entertainment district, which Roberts said is shaping up to be the uptown area -- roughly the area between San Pablo and Telegraph beginning at 19th Street.

The city has contributed nearly \$9 million since late 1999 to support the arts, given artists places to show and sell their work and awarded the bulk of its public arts projects to Oakland artists, Roberts said.

But the demand and competition for city support is intense.

"Though it's never enough, the city does the best it can," Roberts said.

The next step is "branding" uptown as the nexus for Oakland's visual arts.

"There is a whole frontier out there of promoting Oakland as a city of the arts."

It will have to happen without the artists, however, if they can't afford to live and work in Oakland.

"Art scenes flourish in places where artists can be together," said Philip Linhares, chief curator of art for the Oakland Museum of California.

That means places that are affordable, he said.

"It's a matter of economics."

But Linhares said he has seen the opposite trend as artists help transform blighted areas into valuable real estate, only to be out- priced.

Linhares imagined a dream scenario of turning the produce district near Jack London Square into an arts district that would include affordable housing.

One gallery may have already planted that seed in the neighborhood.

The Swarm Gallery on Second Street near Jack London Square opened a year ago in the building that once housed the Museum of Children's Art. Next door is Pro Arts, a community-based arts organization. A 40-unit artists studio complex is scheduled to open by early June around the corner on Jefferson and Third streets.

Part gallery, part studio space, Swarm is an unusual experiment for a privately run showcase, said director Svea Lin Vezzone.

Artists can rent modest-sized studios or pay to use common space located behind the airy, spacious gallery.

The rent helps support the gallery and visitors can wander back to the studios, giving the artists like Villett, Gayles and Smith -- who rent there -- more exposure.

Vezzone said her goal is to make Swarm a place where people can come to see great contemporary art.

If successful, Vezzone said, Swarm will be a beacon for the East Bay arts.

But, she added, "it takes time."

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