

Oakland Gallery Morphs into Movie Studio for Summer of Artist Residencies

By Emily Holmes
June 23, 2016



The buzzwords “community,” “artistic experimentation” and “public engagement” are familiar for alternative art spaces, but Oakland’s Royal NoneSuch Gallery might be one of the few — or only — local spaces that includes the word “fun” prominently in their mission statement.

Currently co-directed by Elizabeth Bernstein, Zoë Taleporos, Dana Hemenway and Sarah Thibault, Royal NoneSuch Gallery was founded by Bernstein and Carrie Hott in 2009. The changes in leadership are part of an

intentional evolution, allowing the organization to fluidly adapt and more organically pursue a variety of interests — while sustaining room for playfulness.

Recurring public programs at the gallery include TV Club, a monthly screening of a television episode picked by a host whose cult fandom guides the evening. The gallery’s exhibition roster includes a group show of “ugly paintings,” poet Tom Comitta’s literary archive and, most recently, Eli Thorne’s installation art about toxic masculinity and athleticism.

A production company is born

This summer, the eclectic gallery adds a new dimension to its programming: a series of short-term residencies for video artists. After receiving an Alternative Exposure grant from Southern Exposure, Royal NoneSuch Gallery shifts gears to become Royal Production Company. Over the course of the summer the gallery provides studio space and resources to four artists and collaboratives: Carolyn Janssen, Kate Rhoades, Amber Cady, and the collective Bonanza. Each residency session includes a special public event; the program culminates with a red carpet screening in September of videos produced during the residencies.

Focusing on video art reflects the gallery’s interest in utilizing the space as a production site — a shift which allows the directors to actively explore their roles as creative and technical support.

Thibault said by email, “We know what it’s like to get dirty. We understood the type of challenges the artists might face because we have faced them ourselves: needing help learning a new technology, having access to equipment or extra manpower or even just getting moral support while taking risks in a new medium.” The gallery often works with emerging artists who might otherwise not have access to this kind of support.

First forays into video

The current artist-in-residence is Carolyn Janssen, who generally works in large-scale digital photo collage. This is her first foray into video work; she’s now experimenting in digital animation and live action scenes. For Janssen, whose surreal and semi-autobiographical work centers on “digital kitsch,” the residency allows exploration beyond the screen, too.

On Thurs., June 23, her event *5 Gazers* invites audience members to kneel at visual renderings of composite celebrity faces (including Dolly Parton, Yoko Ono and Rihanna). Janssen wants the event to open up ways for the audience to experience “owning and enacting the art, with the potential for any sort of unfolding, turn or result.”

Janssen perceives this opportunity to both interact with an audience and explore a new medium as essential to her evolution as an artist. “I always find that my greatest growth happens under conditions where the challenge is new, perhaps intimidating and unfamiliar.”

Continuing long-term projects

For others, the residency enables a welcome chance to continue long-term projects. Beginning June 24, Rhoades will use the residency to develop her ongoing video series, *Required Skimming* (2013–present), which features comedic video vignettes based on texts from art theory and history. The series — which Rhoades wants to grow from 12 parts to 300 — is relatively free-form, featuring live action, animation and non-narrative abstractions. Rhoades will also conduct public audio recordings of queer art history texts for TheoryReader.com, her ongoing project to provide audio book versions of theoretical tomes. For her special event on Thurs., July 6, Rhoades and Maysoun Wazwaz (co-hosts of Congratulations Pine Tree) will host a Queer Art History Trivia Night.

“*Required Skimming* has always been a little bit about poking fun at dense texts that can be very intimidating even to people deeply indoctrinated in the cult of the art world,” Rhoades says. “However, it’s also about generating interest in these texts, some of which I genuinely love and think are critically important.”

Merging identities, bridging creative forms

Mid-July brings in Amber Cady, an artist and psychotherapist whose work merges those two identities. Her project, *Worry & The Animals*, takes on anxiety narratives in emotional life through means of interviews and experiential workshops, culminating in a short experimental film.

The participatory element of a public event opens up a way for Cady to encourage dialogue around mental health, too. “An event allows [self-discovery and empathy] to happen in a group, normalizing conversations around and about mental health, highlighting all the ways we cope. There’s an opportunity to bring from the margins these inner landscapes of complexity and resilience,” she says.

Following Cady’s residency, the artist collective Bonanza (Lindsay Tully, Conrad Guevara and Lana Williams) will use Royal Production Company to produce their second film, a docudrama about local water policies in the Bay Area. The work will feature interviews with policy advocates and Bay Area residents, about “the effects (real and imagined) of the water crisis, using camp aesthetics as well as investigative techniques.” The group works across multiple creative forms — installation, sculpture, painting, publications, fashion — as platforms to collaborate with others throughout their practice.

Reflecting on the importance of growth and evolution for Royal NoneSuch Gallery, the co-directors agree that collaboration — embraced by artists like Bonanza — remains a vital ingredient for their sustainability. Hemenway concurs, adding, “As an artist-run space we need to constantly be savvy, whether it is how we maintain leadership or fundraise.”

But collaboration extends further than individual artist-to-artist interactions. In the Bay Area, offering opportunities to artists gives them an incentive to stick around, even when space is scarce and resources are pricey. As Thibault observed, “The more opportunities there are for artists, the better it is for all of us in the Bay Area.” The uniquely supportive and adaptive environment provided by Royal NoneSuch Gallery proves that change can be good — and fun.