

## ARTS

# Park Benched

The Cost of Art, Part II: Without enough buyers for art, local galleries like Tiny Park can't make the rent

BY SETH ORION SCHWAIGER, FRI., MARCH 28, 2014



Thao Votang and Brian Willey of Tiny Park Gallery (Photo by Jana Birchum)

"Tiny Park is on the move again," reads the first line of the last newsletter from the beloved art space. In a fashion that reflects the personalities of curators Brian Willey and Thao Votang, the letter is honest but optimistic, even in the face of difficulty. The next lines read: "We will be leaving our Navasota Street location at the end of April, at the close of Miguel Aragon's exhibition. The blunt facts ... the rising rent has gotten too high for our limited personal resources, and the Austin art market is still too small. So we will evolve."

Unfortunately, it is a reality that many galleries in Austin have had to face. There are always unique compounding factors, but Austin's lurching market continues to apply undue pressure to the decision-making of art organizers and gallery management. For some, that means moving to greener pastures in cities that boast a more developed art scene with an established support base (Art Palace). For others, it means downsizing (MASS Gallery) or moving further away from high visibility locations in the central city (grayDUCK). For others still, it means a complete shutdown of operations (Champion Contemporary, Okay Mountain, Birdhouse Gallery).

In any given urban area, a certain amount of movement will occur. Galleries will come and go naturally, especially those based in apartments and homes, of which Austin has seen many and in which Tiny Park started. But when so many art spaces have had to retreat in one form or another, the argument can be made that the situation has moved past the natural progression of things and into a state of over-extension. As with any good debate, brilliant minds may be found on both sides, some finding the scene healthy, or at least stable, and others seeing an ecosystem out of homeostasis.

Dr. Katie Geha, who founded the former Austin apartment art space SOFA Gallery, has moved on to become gallery director at the Lamar Dodd School of Art in Athens, Ga. "When one gallery goes down, another sprouts up. Tiny Park allowed a lot of people to see that a gallery can thrive in Austin. Just because they're shutting their doors doesn't mean it wasn't successful. People move on, new people move in. It's a healthy progression."

In a fairly fatalist but equally matter-of-fact tone, Chris Whiteburch of the highly successful nonprofit Co-Lab Projects says, "This town is just not prepared to support the market. If you're for-profit, I wouldn't give you long odds." Executive Director Sean Gaulager agrees, adding: "Hopefully that changes in the future, but right now it's not the climate for it."

As Geha, Whiteburch, and Gaulager allude to, terms like "successful artist" and "healthy scene" are slippery ones and don't necessarily equate to monetary backing. Few artists would disagree, but even within this majority are many who push against the notion that this turnover, or lack of market, is something to be passively accepted. Sterling Allen of Okay Mountain paints his views quite clearly: "Our collective made money, but our gallery never did. We'd always spend what money the collective made on maintaining and running the space. If people in Austin who could afford it spent \$1,000 on a piece of art just once a year, spaces like ours, Tiny Park, and others could stay open."

Some see it both ways. Artist and curator Caitlin McCollom, now finding her footing in New York, recently closed Red Space, an Austin gallery following a model similar to Geha's. "Brian Willey's curatorial vision is poignant and sharply thoughtful, and Thao Votang's management of Tiny Park was an example of class I wish more galleries and directors would follow," she says. Its closing is "a deep cut to the artists, friends, and collectors that supported the gallery. The thing is that while Austin is developing as a scene, there is going to be turnover. The problem perpetually between the lines is money: artists and gallerists underemployed, giving everything they have to their art; too few collectors willing to take chances on non-investment pieces; too little grant money going around."

From Willey, "Closing was always a possibility. We intentionally kept the lease short because we didn't know how it was going to go. Within the past five years, Art Palace moves. Champion closes, D Berman closes. It's clearly pretty hard to do things this way here. I had hoped that the space would end up paying for itself. I hoped that somehow something was going to be different. That things had changed enough. That the time was right."

For those less familiar with the nuts and bolts of the city's art scene, these realities may seem surprising, and for good reason. [MyLife.com](#) recently released a study listing Austin as one of the top 10 cities to be an artist. The study evaluated five factors: cost of living, people 20-34 years of age, people working in the arts industry, number of museums and galleries in the city, and number of households with income over \$200,000. Indeed, these are all important elements for a healthy art scene, but what the study seems to have missed is how they interrelate. Austin may have all the right ingredients, all the right pieces to the puzzle, but these factors have not yet gelled into a functional and stable relationship. Though the city boasts the economy to support a flourishing art scene, the Austin-based artist who lives solely off of art sales remains a rare and endangered species. After racking their brains, Willey and Votang could think of very few in Austin at all and even fewer who do so through contemporary, edgy work. The fact that this is coming from the curators of a gallery frequently listed as one of the top 10 or top five contemporary art spaces in the city (CultureMap, *Austin Chronicle*, Glasstire) is perhaps a more apt indication of the health of Austin's scene.

The city's rapid growth is a double-edged sword. For many Austin art spaces, it means increased overhead, but for Lora Reynolds Gallery it also created opportunity. Associate Director Lauren Grant has said that without the mass influx of people moving to Austin, there would not have been the demand for further building Downtown, and the gallery wouldn't have been able to move from its previous location to its larger, more central space at the base of a new residential high-rise. But Lora Reynolds is unique in Austin, a true blue-chip gallery boasting connections to (and buyers in) New York, Los Angeles, and London, and selling works in the five-figure realm with moderate consistency. It shows international artists to an international audience. The gallery is not without support within Austin as well, but Grant is the first to admit that the city art-buyer base is broadening at a disappointing rate. On Willey and Votang's operation, Grant says, "I like Tiny Park. I haven't been to as many shows as I would have liked, and I'm disappointed now that they are closing. I feel like I've lost my chance. Even though there are so many people coming into Austin, the support for the visual arts is growing at a snail's pace."

For Lora Reynolds Gallery, increasing costs may not be that intimidating, but for many commercial Austin galleries, specifically those promoting nontraditional, local, contemporary artists, the landscape is far more bleak. Without the bolstering effect of outside capital, spaces like Tiny Park hinge solely on the ratio of overhead to the personal finances of those running the space.

Willey says of Tiny Park, "The rent increase this year would be 25 percent. It's considerable when we were at our limit to begin with, and there are plenty of other costs to consider." The curator can list countless other expenses ranging from legally required insurance and alarm systems to the framing of artwork when artists lack the funds to do it themselves. Asked if he and Votang had considered noncommercial routes, he replies, "To be a nonprofit, you have to have a board, and we want more control than that. We also didn't want to compete with our friends for city money. There are a few groups that we very much like in Austin, and we don't want to take away from what they are doing."

Whether or not one chalks up the closing of another gallery to the natural progression of things or a systemic problem, what remains clear is that further support, in the form of either expanded and accessible city funding, private donations, or raw purchasing power, is needed for Austin to develop a more dynamic and diverse visual arts culture. Without that support, the art scene remains continually strained and dwarfed by an ever-increasing population.

"Change takes time," says Votang. "This iteration of Tiny Park helped to change things. And I hope that since the space is no longer here people will think a little bit more about what it is to go to exhibitions and how they can support that." Willey adds, "Many others before us have found the challenge of being a commercial space in Austin, but that doesn't mean there aren't other models, and I think that the alternative venues have done a really good job – like Co-Lab, Common House, and Okay Mountain before them. Even though the commercial thing may not be very viable yet doesn't mean that we all have to be pessimistic, because we do have art, we have a great community, we have organizations that do really cool things. Just because one model is challenging doesn't mean that that's the end of the story. It's frustrating, but rather than bitching and moaning, we just have to find out what we can do."

Willey and Votang are just two of the many artists, curators, gallerists, and critics who have stared at this problem longer than they would have liked. The restlessness has reached a critical mass. So in the interest of finding out "what we *can* do," a future "Cost of Art" article will focus on alternative models, productive collaborations, and possible solutions to the ongoing struggles in our arts scene – with contributions, we hope, from Willey, Votang, and others quoted above. Stay tuned.

Austin is a peculiar city that seems deeply aware of aesthetic trends and sensibilities in food, fashion, music, and architecture, and, in varying degrees, is happy to pay for each. In a word, the city has culture. However, when it comes to visual art (and theatre, dance, comedy, etc.), the city has yet to step up its game. Few spaces are more deserving of support than Tiny Park. By any measure other than financial success, it has risen to the top. Its owners

have presented an exciting lineup of contemporary exhibitions, readings, and performances, and forged collaborations within and outside the visual arts that will last well beyond their closing of the Navasota Street space. The gallery has been praised by its peers, been highlighted by numerous local and national publications, and earned both the respect of the artistic community and the love of its patrons. For those who know them best, there's no doubt that Willey and Votang will be up to something again soon. We will enjoy their final round of events, after which we'll wait patiently for the next project from the power couple, holding out hope for a third incarnation of Tiny Park.

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"New Works by Miguel Aragon" is on view through April 26, Saturdays, noon-5pm, and by appointment at Tiny Park, 1101 Navasota. For more information, visit [www.tinyparkgallery.com](http://www.tinyparkgallery.com).

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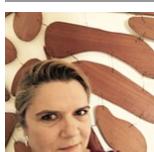


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Tiny Park, Cost of Art, Austin visual art, Brian Willey, Thao Votang, Katie Geha, Sean Gaulager, Sterling Allen, Lauren Grant, Chris Whiteburch, Caitlin McCollom, MASS Gallery, Co-Lab Projects, Lora Reynolds Gallery, grayDUCK Gallery, Champion Contemporary, Okay Mountain, Birdhouse Gallery, SOFA Gallery

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