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Paul So, Hamiltonian Founder



At the end of August, young folks throughout D.C. will have the opportunity to apply for the Hamiltonian Fellowship, a two year program that offers emerging artists further professional development and exposure of their work in the Hamiltonian Gallery, currently under construction at the corner of 14th and U streets NW. The Hamiltonian Fellowship and Gallery is the brainchild of Paul So, a physics professor at George Mason University.

While it may seem odd that a physics professor is becoming an arts entrepreneur, So's scholastic interests in the arts date back to his college education in Claremont, California. While finishing up his BS at

Harvey Mudd College, he was taking art classes at nearby Scripps College, eventually earning a BA in painting. Though art took a backseat in his professional development, it has remained a keen interest of his since leaving California more than a decade ago. DCist approached Paul So to better connect these two interests and to find out more about this opportunity.

How does your background in physics apply toward this gallery and fellowship?

I want to set up a system for artists. In the sciences -- after you earn your PhD -- there is a research period of 2-3 years. Then you are associated with a professor, and he tells you how to write grants and get jobs. You can focus on your research but also focus on the career development -- how to get a job in the sciences. I like that in the sciences, but when I look around in the artistic world, you don't have that. I want to combine the two, so artists can benefit the experience I had in the sciences.

How will the Foundation and Gallery operate and what is your role?

I am the motivator, the founder. I'll hire one gallery manager and one person to run the non-profit. In addition there will be professors and other gallery managers coming in monthly as lecturers. There will be a mentorship program involved. I don't just want it to be a place where the fellows give me their work and say, "show it." I want them to be involved in the aspects of career development.

They should learn how to run the gallery; in addition to setting up their own show they should help out the other artists set up their shows. I am going to provide the space and apply the skills I learned from the sciences. Besides selling the work, artists also need to know how to write grants. That's where I can help out: finding revenue to get the grant and how to write them. It's a learning experience. I also want to set up the program so that artists have experience interacting with arts educators, gallery owners, and collectors. The artists can talk to them, get to know them and establish a relationship.

What is the motivation to start this endeavor?

I've been teaching for 10 years and I was on sabbatical last year. I thought it was a good time to go back into art. D.C has a lot of potential to be a good arts center. But, people are not educated enough to support local

art, and a lot of local artists are looking for local support and not getting it. One of the problems I see with area artists is that they have the urge to leave, go to New York and get represented because they can't find it here.

What kind of criteria do you require for applicants?

I want to be as diverse as possible. I don't want to restrict it to a medium or a style. The fellowship is for two years and I like the idea that every year there will be 10 new people coming in. The nature and feel of the gallery will change. My only requirement is someone who needs the help; they should not have representation already. For those who have been showing at alternative spaces and they now want traditional representation, I think this will be the venue for them.

With a new group of 10 every year, how do you envision the program fluctuating for the fellows over the course of two years?

The fellows get one show a year, and there will be two fellows showing each month. I want the gallery to look like a regular commercial gallery and the two fellows will have extensive space to show what they are working on. The second year I want them to focus on what their artistic vision or direction will be. They will get a lot of freedom in what they want to do, and the gallery staff will help them along to arrive at that stage.

Where does the name Hamiltonian comes from?

In physics the Hamiltonian is a mathematical calculation that describes the evolution of a system. It's the total energy of the system. If you have the Hamiltonian you can predict the progress of the system for all time. It's like a foundation. Interestingly, the name Hamilton is on the building. It was built in 1921 by Wes Hamilton, who was a respected community member and, at the time, one of the few African American generals in the U.S. military. He was also involved in the D.C. schools. I want to utilize that history of the site as well.

What is your specialty in Physics?

Chaos Theory - Non Linear Dynamics. It tries to understand complexity: how complexity arises from interacting elements in complex systems. It's really mathematical. The application I work on now uses dynamical system theory to understand communication between neurons in neurosystems. In particular, how group neurons interact and create patterns to see how information passes from different regions of the brain.

Do you view the Hamiltonian as an extension of your physics research, with artists acting as the neurons and the art world and gallery system in D.C. acting as a neurosystem?

Honestly, I was not consciously making the connection but your point is interesting. There is a research group at the [Krasnow](#) (Institute for Advance Study, an independent research institute within George Mason University) that studies the connection between social complexity and neuroscience.

More information about The Hamiltonian Fellowship and Gallery can be found at <http://hamiltoniangallery.org>

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