

Mason Physics Professor has started a program for emerging artists

We recently sat down with Paul So, Physics Professor at George Mason University in the Department of Physics and Astronomy and the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study. Dr. So has just started Hamiltonian Artists (<http://hamiltonianartists.org>) in Washington DC. Hamiltonian Artists is a 501c organization dedicated to providing professional development opportunities for creative artists in their early career.

We just couldn't resist asking the question, "How does a Physics Professor open a non-profit dedicated to helping artists? Where does your passion for the arts originate?"

There are actually two questions here. Let me try to answer the second one first. I have these dual interests in art and physics since I was young. I like the expressive capacity of art in representing nature and the rigorous ability of science in explaining the natural world. While I was getting my physics BS at Harvey Mudd College in California, I was able to finish my physics requirements earlier. At that point, since I have always been interested in painting, I took the opportunity to formally learn the skills by taking studio art classes from Scripps College (the sister college next door). I have taken enough courses to earn a BS in studio art but since Scripps is an all female college, I was only able to get an acknowledgement on my transcript. From then on, I have been painting very actively. I came to the Washington DC area for my physics PhD program at University of Maryland at College Park. I continue to paint and show my works locally and in galleries and art spaces around the region. The making of art and the learning of science were a good mix for me during those years. However, when I was getting close to my graduation from the University of Maryland, the demand of an academic career in science was taking a large portion of my time and I had to put my art on the back burner at that time. Nevertheless, I have always found opportunities to continue my paintings. In the back of my mind, I have planned to come back to the art world in full force when the opportunity will be right again. With my scientific career on track and my sabbatical last year, I took the opportunity again to try to start something new and exciting for the DC art community.

To answer your question on why I have chosen to start a non-profit art fellowship program dedicated to new artists, I need to go back to my physics training again. As a scientist in a highly competitive field, I deeply appreciate the benefits of the post-doctoral training opportunity that I got at the beginning of my career. During the two-year period after my PhD, I was working with my postdoctoral mentor in both sharpening my scientific skills as well as



Paul So, Founder, Hamiltonian Artists. Picture provided by Paul So

learning the nuts and bolts of becoming a professor in an academic institution. However, as an artist, I see that similar career development programs for new artists, especially on the business aspects of art, are rare. That is one of the main motivations for me in developing such a non-profit program (Hamiltonian Artists, <http://hamiltonianartists.org>) to benefit innovative artists starting out in their career.

What is the vision for the Hamiltonian Artists?

As stated on our web site, the mission of the Hamiltonian Artists is: "To build a dynamic community of innovative artists and effective visual art leaders by providing professional development opportunities for these aspiring new artists and by advancing their entrepreneurial success."

On a more exciting front, I am also working with the newly formed Board of Hamiltonian Artists to try to broaden the scope of our vision. Harold Linton (the chair of the Department of Art and Visual Technology at George Mason) has put it in the form of a larger umbrella entity called the Hamiltonian Art Center: "The Hamiltonian Art Center in Washington D.C. is a multidisciplinary, multicultural laboratory for the exploration and advancement of contemporary art. In its programs, the Hamiltonian Art Center balances a commitment to experimentation with new and emerging art forms with a commitment to traditions of innovation and affirms the mission of education, research, and community service. Through exhibitions, screenings, performances, artist residencies, and educational programs, the Hamiltonian acts as a unique forum where established and emerging artists can test ideas and where diverse audiences can participate in cultural experiences that enhance understanding of the art of our time."

How does the program work, what is provided for the artists and what is expected from the participants?

Hamiltonian Artists provides training, mentoring and exhibition opportunities, as well as a modest stipend to all the fellows within the program with the hope that these resources allow the artists to advance their careers and contribute to the art community at large. In particular, all fellows are provided with:

- Representation by the Hamiltonian Gallery for the full two years of the fellowship (extendable to three years upon review).
- Annual focused exhibitions at the Hamiltonian Gallery.
- Monthly critiques with all exhibiting artists.
- Regular seminars and lectures with leaders in the art community.
- Advisory teams for planning upcoming exhibitions.
- Mentorship programs with members of the advisory panel and fellowship alumni.
- Business and career development training including gallery operations training with the gallery director.
- Grant development training with gallery development director.
- Post-fellowship placement assistance for artists looking for representation in other commercial galleries and positions in other art-related jobs.
- A yearly NYC day trip to visit various art spaces in the city.
- A portion of the work produced by the So Hamiltonian Fellows will receive consideration for purchase at the end of their term.
- Access to a new e-philanthropy micro-grants program run by Hamiltonian Artists.

- A stipend of \$2,000.

On the other hand, we want our fellows to be engaged with the program and be responsible to the other fellows within our program. We are trying to build a community of artists and the community-support and peer-learning aspects of the program is very important in the design of the program. To accomplish this goal, we expect all fellows to:

- Participate in monthly critiques and planning sections for other gallery artists.
- Attend program seminars and lectures.
- Attend other art shows in the area and participate in group discussion afterward.
- Participate in the gallery and fellowship operations by providing direct operational assistance to the planning, promotion, and set-up of two regular gallery shows (one must be for a show for another fellow).
- Work with the development director to prepare for a grant.
- Participate in the yearly selection review of new artists.
- Participate in community outreach programs.
- Alumni are expected to maintain engagement with future mentorship programs and seminar series.

What were some of your initial hurdles in getting Hamiltonian Artists off the ground?

I am fortunate that as a relative outsider to the DC art scene, I have garnered quite a bit of support for my endeavor. Almost all artists and most gallery owners that I have met are strongly enthusiastic about this project. My biggest initial hurdle for this project was in finding an appropriate location for the gallery. One of the key ingredients for the future success of this program is to anchor the organization with a prominent location in the contemporary art center of DC. Another important issue is the long term sustainability of the project. The rising rents in Dupont Circle and along the 7th Street NW corridor have forced many art spaces to look for alternatives in recent years.

My plan is to approach the physical space requirement from a business prospective by treating it as a development project. I am trying to look for under-utilized sites that I can redevelop with the possibility of rentable/salable spaces in addition to the gallery space. With the recent economic boom in DC, finding an appropriate space with these requirements was not easy. I was lucky that a perfect location at 1353 U Street NW (in the heart of the revitalized U Street neighborhood) became available last year and I took the chance in purchasing it for redevelopment. The location and size of site is perfect, but the fact that it is a historic building in a historic district also presented me with a different set of challenges. While this project is still in its early development stage, I am foreseeing that there will be other bigger hurdles to overcome and I am hoping that I can continue to count on the assistance and advice from willing helpers of the community.

As your organization is starting to grow, what are some of your immediate concerns

While we are still waiting for the gallery site to be redeveloped (expected completion date in June 2008), we have launched our web site (<http://hamiltonianartists.org>) and started accepting applications for the fellowship program. Since we anticipate a majority of the applicants will be Bachelor Fine Arts more than Masters in Fine Arts graduates from the region, we have contacted the art departments (and career services) in various art schools around the region (GMU – obviously, Mid-City Artists, Corcoran, UMD, Towson State, and Howard). We are still trying to set up connections with GWU, American, Georgetown, and VCU in the coming weeks. If your readers can help me to be in

contact with someone from these schools, I would appreciate the help. Since our program is for all new artists and not limited to recent graduates, I am also trying to spread the word in local artists groups such as the Mid-City Artists, ArtDC, the Torpedo Factory, etc. There is still quite a lot ground to cover.

On the funding side, we have submitted proposals to the Case Foundation and the Caterpillar Foundation for start-up funds. With our tax-exempt status still pending with the government, we are in the process of lining up proposals for standard art/cultural funding groups requiring this status.

What advice would you offer to other aspiring entrepreneurs?

Don't ever let go of your passion. In one's life journey, passion is the one and single force that will drive you. At the same time, one must consider the community in which you come from. Your actions should build and nurture the community. To bind these two together, one should also be prudent in his/her business choices so that these two goals can be sustained over time. I am hoping that more people can take up the challenging role as a social entrepreneur.



For more information about Hamiltonian Artists: <http://www.hamiltonianartists.org>

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