

# At the Hamiltonian, a Treasury for Artists

*Philanthropist's Fellowships Aim to Foster Commercial Success*

By JESSICA DAWSON  
Special to The Washington Post

Washington artists, who's your daddy? If you're an artist without a gallery, your benefactor could be a self-effacing and bespectacled man named Paul So.

When the 41-year-old So accepts you into his arts incubator program, you become a Hamiltonian Artist. You'll receive \$2,000 annually and the guarantee of one exhibition per year. So will keep you for two years, at which point you will be ejected from the nest whether you've secured gallery representation or not.

So is a tough-love kind of daddy.

The nonprofit Hamiltonian fellowship program (named after a printing company that once operated out of the U Street NW building that now houses the nonprofit and its exhibition space,

"We want our artists to move on."

This pragmatic approach includes a lecture series aimed at schooling fellows in the business side of their practice. So modeled the program on the postdoctoral fellowship he enjoyed while working on his PhD in physics. (A sometime painter, So has been a physics professor at George Mason University for more than a decade.)

The Hong Kong-born benefactor comes from a family of philanthropists. With his parents and brother, he has established scholarships at his alma mater, the math- and science-centered Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, Calif., among other good deeds. Hamiltonian is his first major move into arts philanthropy.

Hamiltonian Gallery's inaugural show presents its three-person exhibition model: An established artist acts as mentor and his work hangs alongside two fellows. Right now, New York-based multimedia artist Nao Matsumoto presides; fellows Ian MacLean Davis, from Maryland, and Virginia artist Bryan Rojsuontikul sit next to him.

Walking in, it's clear who is the mentor and who is green. Matsumoto's exceptionally crafted pop objects have a wry humor and high production values. The fellows experiment with expanding notions of painting (Rojsuontikul sticks tape to canvas) and layered images culled from popular media (Davis).

Though Matsumoto is scheduled to critique the fellows' artworks, the gallery has yet to formalize mentor interaction. Hamiltonian hopes mentors will shape the young artists in the program, yet it remains unclear how. The current group didn't meet until its show's installation.

As for the exhibition itself, bright colors and a pop sensibility dominate. Rather than offer a coherent group show, the Hamiltonian model seems to be that of three small solo shows sharing a single gallery.

Though short-term questions linger, So is confident about his gallery's long-term sustainability. In hopes of securing his investment, he purchased the Hamiltonian building two years ago for \$1.3 million. Washington architecture firm Inscape Studio reconfigured the interior into four units, three of which So rents out. His strategy to guarantee stability, So says, was to think of Hamiltonian as a development project.

One of So's new tenants will be Project 4 gallery, which closes its final show at its Ninth and U digs tomorrow. Inscape principal Greg Kearley holds a stake in the gallery, which had been searching for a new space for some time. A deal was struck, and now the gallery holds a three-year lease for an upstairs, double-height space with north- and south-facing windows.

Project 4 will inaugurate its new space with the time-based work of Los Angeles artist Thomas Mueller on Nov. 8; Hamiltonian Gallery opens its next show the same night.

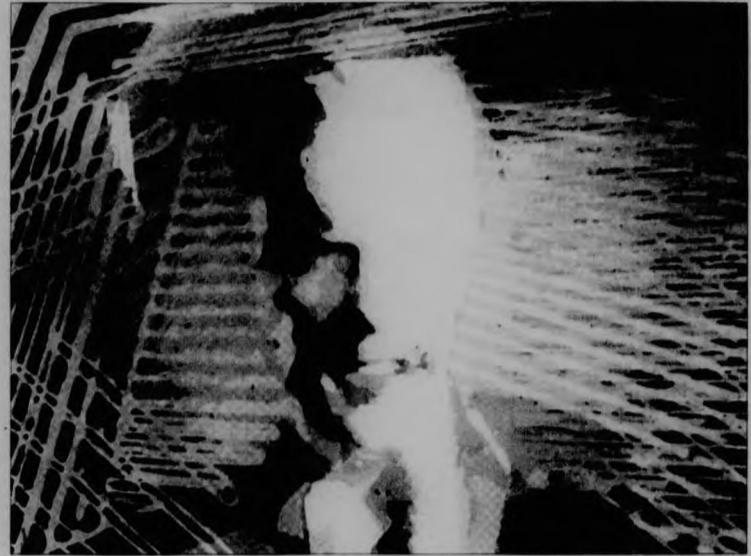
In the meantime, visitors have two days to catch the end of Brooklyn-based artist Michael Scoggins' quirky drawings show at the old Project 4. Fashioned to look like children's drawings on oversize sheaths of spiral-bound, three-ring notebook paper, the artworks' politically charged messages are softened by their earnest, childlike scrawl. Most are signed, as a child might, "Michael S."

Scoggins plays smartly with scale, offering a convincingly gargantuan doodle. Its size underscores its charm and offsets the stridency of Scoggins's agenda.

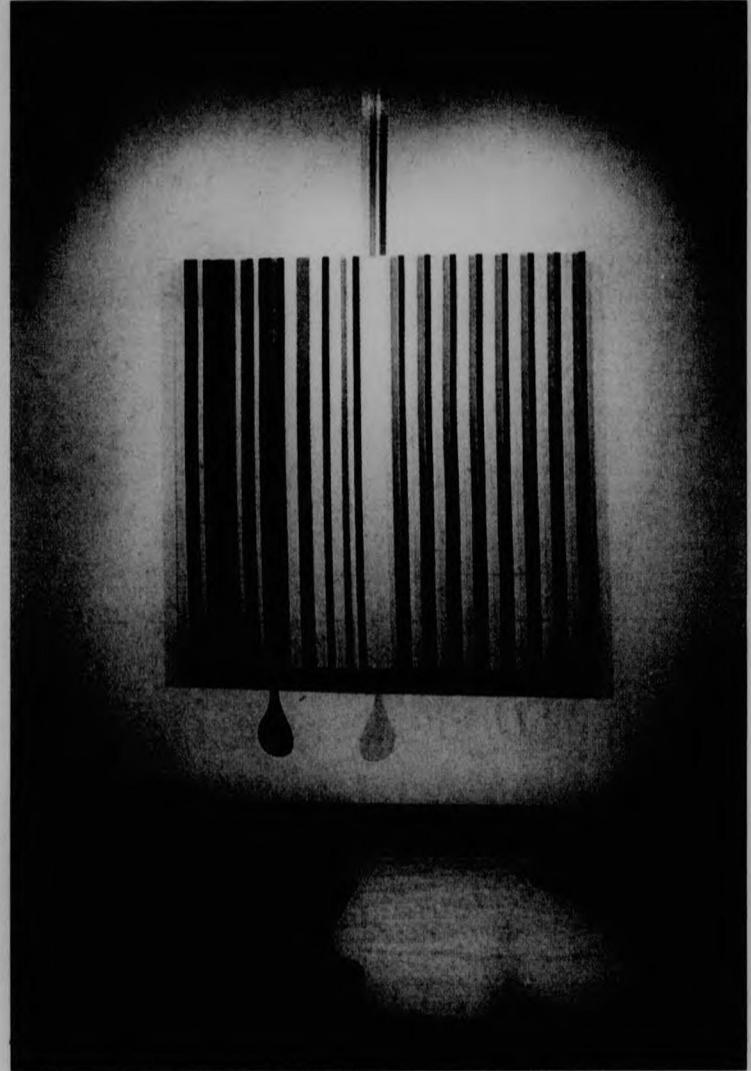
In one work, Scoggins writes "I'm the decider" more than 80 times on a single page. It's an amusing take on a much-lampooned bit of presidential discourse. If only real life were so funny.

**Hamiltonian Gallery** is at 1353 U St. NW; hours by appointment through end of October; 202-332-1116; show runs through Nov. 2. [www.hamiltoniangallery.com](http://www.hamiltoniangallery.com).

**Michael Scoggins** at Project 4, 903 U St. NW, Wednesday-Friday 2 p.m.-6 p.m., Saturday noon-6 p.m.; 202-232-4340; closes tomorrow. [www.project4gallery.com](http://project4gallery.com).



HAMILTONIAN GALLERY PHOTOS



Clockwise from above, the work of mentor Nao Matsumoto is shown with that of fellows Ian MacLean Davis and Bryan Rojsuontikul.

Hamiltonian Gallery) announced its first 10 fellows earlier this year. Early in 2009, the organization will name 10 more. The gallery will carry a 20-fellow maximum at any given time. (Artists rotate out if they find a gallery during their tenure.)

Hamiltonian Artists install their exhibitions in the building's handsome 2,000-square-foot first-floor storefront adjacent to a liquor store and the Republic Gardens nightclub. The gallery's inaugural show features a trio of artists and hangs until Nov. 2.

Though a for-profit enterprise, Hamiltonian Gallery comes armed with a budget geared toward taking losses. So built four years of red ink into his spending plan because he was intent on buffering the space from financial ups and downs.

Nevertheless, So recognizes the imperative that his artists sell.

To succeed, he says, fellows "have to be seen as viable commercial artists." The Hamiltonian goal is to develop their artists' marketing savvy.

An emphasis on artists as capitalist entities has been the going template for the art world for some time. Of late, an MFA has been seen as an artist's most vital imprimatur. But even advanced degrees don't always prepare graduates to sell themselves.

"We're a steppingstone," says Hamiltonian Gallery Director Jacqueline Ionita, herself a recent graduate of the Corcoran's painting department.



I WON'T ASK FOR HELP WITH AUNT HELEN ANYMORE. I JUST WANT TIPS ON ATTAINING YOUR LEVEL OF BLOODLESS ATTACHMENT.

## CAROLYN HAX

Dear Carolyn:

My half sister was raised by her mother and I by mine; our father died when we were kids. We have an aunt on our dad's side, but no other relatives. This aunt is now elderly and ailing, but because of bad blood in the family (apparently this aunt was very hateful to her mother), my half sister has cut her off for the past 14 years.

The burden of caring for our aunt falls completely on me now, and my half sister refuses to help, either financially or by just visiting sometimes. I am very resentful of having to carry this load by myself. My half sister has a big family on her mother's side, with lots of support. I am basically by myself. How do I come to terms with having a sister who does not want to engage with my side of the family, and who lives as if our father and his side of the family simply did not exist? What can I do to engage her?

*The City of Dysfunction*

I can sympathize with the strain you're feeling, and I can see why it's so tempting to look at your half sister's extended family as the salvation you're being denied.

However, look at it from her perspective. You are asking her to provide aid and comfort to her tormentor. (Gandhi- or MLK-like forbearance is something we ask of ourselves, not of others.) In fact, she could be as resentful of your willingness to hold the hand of someone who terrorized her family as you are of her unwillingness to pitch in.

If you would like to make one more appeal for her help, then I would be sure to acknowledge your half sister's pain, and make it clear you would regard it as a show of support for you, and not necessarily for your aunt. Any appeal would have to be accompanied by an assurance that you will understand if the answer is no. Asking, good; guilt-tripping, bad.

For the sake of your own peace of mind, I

would also advise not looking over your shoulder to gaze at all the help you aren't getting. Instead, concentrate on owning your decision to the best of your ability. Even without the bad blood, your half sister would have no obligation to help. If you aren't up to providing the care you feel your aunt needs, then please tap local elder-care resources for help (there's a locator at [www.eldercare.gov](http://eldercare.gov)).

I don't know boo about your half sister, but I know this — you and she both have made difficult choices. If you made the choice necessary for your own peace of mind, then please consider that your half sister did the same.

Dear Carolyn:

Okay, please settle something between my friends and me.

Is it really the end of the world when a guy doesn't call when he says he's going to call?

When it happens, I'm not sure what to do, but my friends say to lose him. There's got to be some middle ground, especially since I've been guilty of that same crime.

*Washington*

Don't look for reasons to drop someone, and don't look for reasons to stay with someone. What's left is two people's actual interest in each other. That's the middle ground.

*Write to Carolyn Hax, Style, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071, or tellme@washpost.com.*

**ONLINE DISCUSSION** Carolyn Hax's weekly Web chat is at noon Fridays at [www.washingtonpost.com/discussions](http://www.washingtonpost.com/discussions).