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Vessel Gallery

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Don't get us wrong. We enjoy visiting art galleries. What's not to love? The hush. That pristine space, almost other-worldly in its purity. And the people watching. (Especially that.)

But they can be a bit, well, sterile. Even the ones run by the most talented gallerists tend to be variants on the Big White Box concept (yes, we know, the better to not distract from the aaaart). The spaces are cold. Intimidating. Distancing. Precious. And it reinforces the feeling that art-whatever and however fabulous it is--is for Someone Else. (Richer. Thinner. And neat, very neat.)

Then there are the galleries that resemble Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe or your great-grandmother's attic. Yes, they have their charms (the thrill of the hunt). But they have their challenges too (clutter, overwhelm, allergy activation.)

For the most part, galleries don't create an environment in which you feel *good*. Open. Intrigued. Comfortable. Charmed. And do we have to mention the connection between feeling good and feeling a wee bit more free with the Amex? No, we didn't think so.

This is a major missed opportunity (for the galleries, for the artists and crafts people they showcase, not to mention the rest of us.) We get that many don't want to sully art with commerce...but it's commerce that helps the artists and artisans eat well enough to keep dreaming and creating.

But all is not lost....there is a handful of smart galleries that have created environments that inspire, and make you feel better about the art they feature. [Vessel Gallery](#), in Oakland, is one of those all-too rare places.



Located in the very cool Uptown neighborhood in the former Auto Row, the newly-reopened Vessel focuses on fine art and art jewelry, much of which works at that intersection of craft and art we're so obsessed with.

The two-story space is warm, inviting, soulful. The bijou first floor looks a little more like a traditional gallery, but its size and inspired choices in visual accessories keep it from That Dreaded Gallery Feeling.

It's the second floor that blows you away, (and makes us want to move in.) It's a huge open space that refers to the historic character of the building (a former livery, auto parts manufacturing, glass shop) and has little warm, intimate spaces created with antique and artisanal furniture and vignettes that draw you in, engage you, make you want to stay a while. There's also a glorious urban rooftop garden that's the perfect combination of urban and organic.









Then of course, there's the art (more on that later), which is given space to breathe, but also a context. And there's a magic to how the work is placed: it's definitely prominent, but not overwhelming. In fact it feels like you are as much a part of the equation as the art is... and the space is about the connection between the two. (Whoa, what a concept.)

Now, this doesn't just happen. It's the culmination of a million little choices, like paint color (a light but warm grey), incredible and subtle lighting, spacing, tongue and groove floor, original pieces from the history of the building (that cool/funky winch-like contraption from the 1920s used for hauling autos to the second floor for repair).

And those choices were made by the visionary who created and runs the gallery: Lonnie Lee.



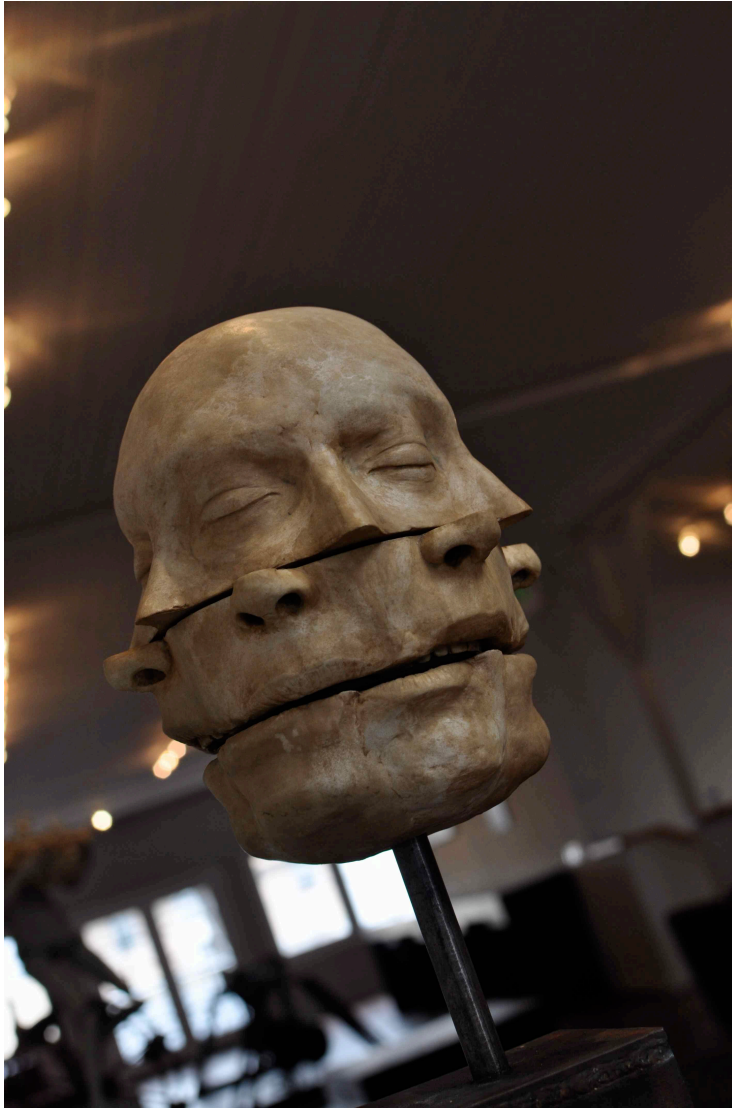
A refugee from the visual communications business, Lonnie opened the first iteration of Vessel Gallery in Berkeley's Claremont area, spending 5 or so years there and honed the vision that's become the new Vessel. And it's a very smart vision.

What was your idea behind this gallery? Well, it was actually to *not* do a traditional gallery. I wanted to create a lifestyle gallery. I wanted to bring in people that the traditional business wasn't serving... there's a huge segment interested in art but don't frequent the white box gallery. (Like we said.) So I wanted to break down those barriers. I wanted to make them comfortable in the setting....suggest to people how they CAN live with art.

And what about the work you feature? *Note that we did this interview a few weeks ago, and the work has changed....in fact there are two new installations opening THIS WEEKEND called In the Garden (porcelain sculptures by Natalie Cartwright), and Return to Romanticism (jewelry by Luana Coonen).*

But what we saw a couple of weeks ago was a great indicator of Lonnie's taste: the drawings and kinetic sculptures that we saw by the amazing Cyrus Tilton that day were approachably edgy, intriguing, clever, and confident...and we can't get them out of our heads. And the jewelry by jeweler and metalsmith Eric Silva...incredibly covetable. We can see living with several pieces.)





Whatever it is I choose, I look for an authentic voice. I work with both emerging and established artists, and really work with them to develop their voice, get to know them...I get to see the development of their work, in the context of what the artist was going through at that time. Its quite a process.

And your collectors? Why do they collect your artists? It's so incredibly varied...Some love to learn about the artists, the back story, and connect that way. Others just connect visually. They're moved by sight and what they see. There are really tight collectors, and they'll only collect those kinds of things. Others need a little direction and context to uncover their tastes.



When I watch someone connect to a piece of art....that's the best, most amazing thing. That's my bonus. I have so many stories. One day, Cyrus Tilton's work was in the window. A guy outside the window was just standing there, applauding the work. I was so blown away by the expression, the appreciation. Can you imagine what the artist would feel? And I've seen people come in and just weep. It's the gesture...the person just connected. She got it. Those are experiences that no sale of a show can replace.



What do you say to new collectors? If you love it, get it. DO it because you love to be surrounded by it.

What do you collect? Everything. Pieces will reflect that time and space and what was happening in my life. I'm very sentimental. And I associate events with every piece....everything has a story: where I was, the person who sold it to me, something about the artist.

And what 5 things define you?

Music

Art in general

Family

Supportive relationships

And I'm in search of my talisman. Still.

Well done, Lonnie, and thanks for creating such a fabulous environment for connections. Go visit Vessel. Soon. (And if you're having an event....the space is available for that too...ripe for creating other types of connections.) Now, if we could just move in....

Details

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Lonnie Lee

www.vessel-gallery.com

Posted on [June 10, 2010](#) by [Regina Connell](#)

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One Response to *Vessel Gallery*



Arthur Manzi says:

June 11, 2010 at 11:02 am

I loved the Tilton show, too! Memorable, even haunting, objects. And I'm planning to get to the new "In the Garden" show soon. Thanks for spreading the word about Vessel.