

ART WIRE

# Vessel Gallery, Oakland Art Murmur Fixture, to Close Following Lease Termination



Lonnie Lee, director and curator at Vessel Gallery. Lee's landlord declined to renew the Oakland gallery's lease, citing a desire to take the building in a "different direction." **(Sam Lefebvre/KQED)**

Eight years ago, Lonnie Lee opened Vessel Gallery with a solo exhibition by Oakland sculptor Cyrus Tilton. Next month, she'll close her Oakland gallery—a fixture of [Oakland Art Murmur](#)—with a show by the same artist. “The first was *A Place In-Between*,” she said, sitting behind a tower of art books in the renovated loft on 25th Street. “The last is called *Elsewhere*.”

"That was accidental."

Lee's rent has increased more than 70 percent since 2010, and, with her current lease set to expire, she feared another costly hike. Instead, the landlord outright declined to renew. Through a property management company, owner Matthew Iglehart told Lee in late September that he wants to take his buildings in "another direction"—a chilling message for Uptown galleries composing a key node of First Fridays and Oakland Art Murmur.

In addition to Vessel, Iglehart and his family own the 25th St. properties housing several art spaces, including SLATE Contemporary, FM Gallery, Roscoe Ceramic Gallery, Manna Gallery, The Wall Gallery, Local Language and Mercury 20, public records show. Iglehart also owns the New Parkway Theater on 26th Street.



The outside of Vessel Gallery on 25th Street in Oakland. *(via Google Maps)*

Iglehart declined to be interviewed for this story or to elaborate on his new direction, writing in an email to KQED that he is still “interested in supporting creative people and business in Oakland.” Lee, however, said Vessel’s ouster signals a shift away from the arts and towards the housing and commercial development that the arts helped hasten and attract. “You do the deduction,” she said. “Spaces like these don’t yield for the square footage anymore.”

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Lee, 54, also faulted city officials for touting the area’s cultural vibrancy without building security for gallery businesses, which are struggling to compete against redevelopment proposals and higher-earning tenants as demand for commercial space intensifies in Oakland. Beginning in 2014, Lee and neighbors agitated for formally anointing the area a Cultural Arts District, only to find the humble resolution scuttled entirely.

The Uptown Arts District resolution would’ve increased galleries’ eligibility for grants, and asked city planners to consider neighborhood cultural assets in decision-making. Lee, working with stakeholders and elected officials, revised the resolution more than 30 times. In

late 2016 it was scheduled for Oakland City Council subcommittee consideration, but ultimately removed from the agenda. “The resolution got whittled down to just *naming* the district, but they wouldn’t hear it,” Lee said. “All we wanted was some protection.”



Lonnie Lee at her desk in Vessel Gallery. The landlord for the building in Oakland's Uptown neighborhood has declined to renew Vessel Gallery's lease. (Sam Lefebvre/KQED)

Vessel artist David Burke echoed Lee in comments about the gallery’s closure posted online. “The leaders of our city have made it clear that while they support the idea of Oakland being a haven for visual and performing artists and the spaces we occupy, they are not willing to create enough protections for our community in way of affordable housing and spaces that make it possible for this type of work to continue,” he wrote.

Lee relocated [Vessel](#) from Berkeley to 25th St. in 2010, after spending months transforming the former horse livery's hayloft into an attractive 5,000 square foot exhibition space. Her neighbors included now-defunct art spaces such as 21 Grand. Oakland Art Murmur, the gallery crawl founded in 2006, had yet to splinter into the now-separately-run street festival known as First Fridays. "Chandra Cerrito had just opened, and Johansson Projects was already here," she recalled. "It was modest, but bustling and focused."

Lee, a trained painter, stands apart from many gallerists in Oakland. She prefers solo and two-person exhibitions to group shows, and Vessel's contemporary fare skews abstract and challenging but rarely trendy. "I am not a hobbyist," she said. "This is full-time." She represents more than 30 artists, and tries to show work by each of them at least once a year. "I ask artists how they've arrived at a style, what they've done away with," she said, paging through one of two Tilton art books published by Vessel. "The narrative is key."

Lee styles Vessel as a platform for a maturing Oakland art scene, a museum-bound underground. She cultivates collectors, and helps artists snare grants and sales. Six of the artists she represents derive their income from their practice. Tilton, who died of cancer last year at the age of 39, had little profile before linking with Lee. *Lovers*, a

sculpture from his 2011 Vessel show, now lives in the permanent collection at Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum, which recently staged his first major museum exhibition.



The interior of Vessel Gallery. (Courtesy Vessel Gallery)

Tilton's *Elsewhere* and Sanjay Vora's *Together and Apart* open Friday, Nov. 2, and Vessel closes permanently at its current location Nov. 17. (It's currently holding a [moving sale](#).) "The hardest part was telling my artists," said Lee, who's beginning to look for another brick-and-mortar location. "My lack of space is their lack of space, their lack of an in-person audience. My collectors are upset too. One action like this affects a lot of people."

Oakland Art Murmur board of directors president Jean Durant called Vessel an “anchor of the art scene,” writing in a statement that Lee had a vision to “connect artists with a diverse audience comprised of the public, the art industry, and collectors.”

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The last founding Art Murmur participant, Rock Paper Scissors, closed its Telegraph Avenue gallery [after a rent hike](#) in 2015.

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