

Vessel Gallery, Oakland Art Murmur Fixture, to Reopen Following 2018 Displacement

By [Sam Lefebvre](#)  Jan 10



Lonnie Lee stands in the new location of Vessel Gallery on 23rd Street near Telegraph Avenue in Oakland. *(Sam Lefebvre/KQED)*

Oakland Art Murmur fixture Vessel Gallery will reopen in February more than a year after being displaced from its longtime 25th Street home, curator and director Lonnie Lee told KQED.

The contemporary visual art gallery will take over the 23rd Street location occupied since

2018 by Ashara Ekundayo
Gallery and, for 11 years prior,
Chandra Cerrito Contemporary.

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

After considering other East Bay locations, Lee is relieved to return to the neighborhood and continue the 23rd St. storefront, including adjoining rooms once home to Krowwork gallery, as a key node of First Fridays street festival and related gallery network Art Murmur. “It feels good re-establish a home and say, ‘We’re still here,’” Lee said. “Only time can personify a space.”

**Local Language,
Art Fabrication
Studio, to Replace
Vessel Gallery in
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Vessel reopens Saturday, Feb. 15 with a reception for *Migration*, a group show featuring artists familiar from Lee’s curating—David Burke, Pamela Dernham, Gordon Glasgow, Todd Laby, Walter James Mansfield and Jos Sances—plus Cheryl Derricotte and Arleene Correa Valencia.



'Individuals,' a 2016 installation by Vessel artist Cyrus Tilton. (Courtesy Vessel Gallery)

As KQED **previously reported**, Vessel was displaced from its home of eight years in November, 2018 after the landlord, Matthew Iglehart, declined to renew the lease. Iglehart's explanation that he wanted to take his buildings in "another direction" worried his other gallery tenants nearby. Local Language, a commercial art fabrication studio next door, **then** struck a deal with Iglehart to expand into Vessel's space days after Lee learned of her imminent displacement.

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In the year since, Lee struggled to find an affordable location comparable to her 5,000 square feet of exhibition space in the light-

filled, renovated hayloft on 25th St. She was also skeptical of retail spaces below new housing developments, which city officials have promoted as options for displaced galleries, due to concerns over cost and aesthetics. Then she heard from Cerrito, who now works as an art consultant, that Ekundayo was leaving 23rd St. to focus on her writing.

The landlord at 480 23rd St. is Haig Mardikian, who also rents to the Johansson Projects gallery next door, and whose son John Mardikian created Telegraph beer garden around the corner. Lee declined to share the details of her new lease but described the terms as “warm and affordable.” One afternoon recently, she eyed non-load bearing walls for potential removal, and described the back rooms as “flexible space” for events such as screenings and guest-curated exhibitions.



Vessel curator and director Lonnie Lee sits in the gallery's previous location on 25th Street in Oakland. (Sam Lefebvre/KQED)

Vessel opened in Oakland in 2010 around the same time as Chandra Cerrito and Johansson Projects, one of a new crop of contemporary galleries aiming to bring the attention of collectors and institutions to little-known or underground local artists. Lee made the gallery a destination for abstract sculpture and painting with sharply-installed solo and two-person exhibitions, helping place work by Vessel artists such as Cyrus Tilton and Iris Polos in museum collections.

Lee also played a leading role between 2014-2016 in seeking formal recognition for the proposed “Uptown Arts District,” a move area gallerists said would help protect the neighborhood’s cultural assets from displacement. Oakland City Council scuttled the proposal after property owners objected, supporters said. Oakland’s only official cultural district, the Black Arts Movement and Business District, has struggled for investment since its creation in 2016.

Vessel is reopening in a changed neighborhood. Four years after Rock Paper Scissors, the last founding Art Murmur participant, closed following a rent hike, developers market luxury housing as “constructed on the site of Oakland’s original Art Murmur.” Across the street from Vessel is RASA, where studios start at \$2,600/month

and the leasing office is styled as “Gallery 459,” while a blinking sign above the lobby of another new building nearby reads “Telegraph Arts.”

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