

## Oakland's Art Explosion /Max Eternity



What comes to mind when you hear mention of Oakland, California? If it's not a resurgence in civic renewal and the arts and humanities, then perhaps whatever you once thought you knew about Oakland needs to be updated.

Oakland's [reincarnation](#) is well underway. For in the last decade, not only has Oakland seen a dramatic transformation in its urban planning, educational systems and overall economics, it now also enjoys the benefits of a hip and thriving art scene, in spite of a souring economy felt across America.

Evidence of beautification projects can be found throughout the city. The soaring, humanist, sculptural figures of [Karen Cusolito](#) seem ubiquitous as well.

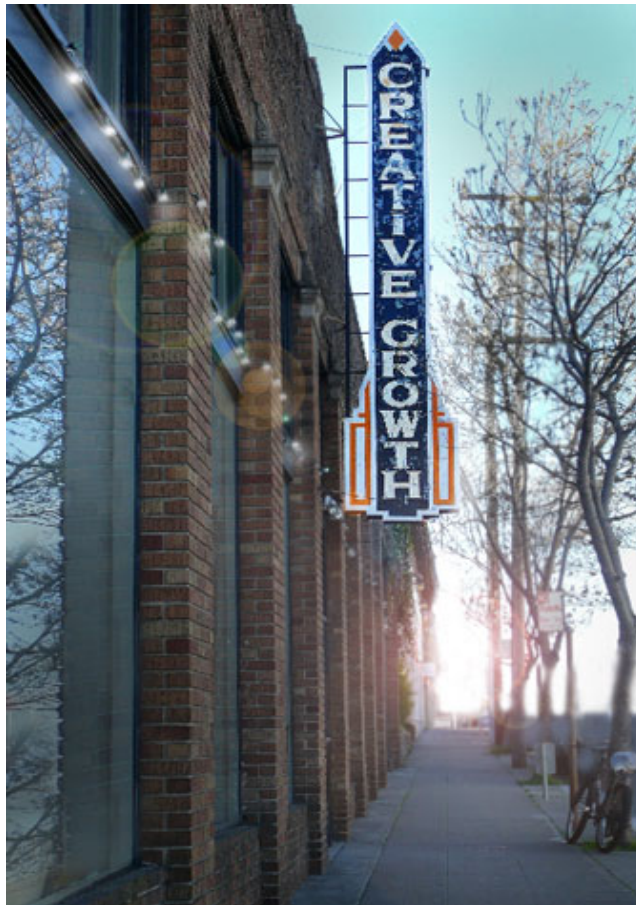
There's an enthusiasm felt and expressed throughout the arts community in Oakland right now, of which Ben Cooper, who recently curated a show for Chandra Cerrito Gallery, entitled *The Moderns*, says "Although my knowledge of the scene only goes back a few years ago... even in that time, the volume of the gallery, for instance, has exponentially increased." Adding that "The awareness of that is just starting, I think, to permeate the general atmosphere. We're getting a lot of people coming to visit us now, where in the past, it wasn't even on their radar." And though Cooper says that doesn't necessarily measure success, it does "speak to quality and vibrancy of the artistic community and the moment in Oakland right now," he says.



2 monumental sculptures by Karen Cusolito (Image: Max Eternity)

Some have been on the scene a little longer sharing Cooper's observation, including Jordan DeStabler who says of an arts organization he heads "There was a dearth of this type of organization in Oakland... in the last 6 to 7 years that has entirely changed, in part to the hyper gentrification in San Francisco." This DeStabler says in

reference to the growing trend for some up-and-coming urbanites choosing Oakland as their home, instead of San Francisco, because of San Francisco's often prohibitive rental rates. "We have a lot of 20 to 30 something's that would have been in SF and are now in Oakland," he says.



*Exterior facade of Creative Growth (Image: Creative Growth)*

An artist who grew up surrounded by artists, DeStabler is the Studio Manager of [Creative Growth](#) art center, which describes itself as a "unique environment" from which art created is included in prominent collections and museums worldwide... serving adult artists with developmental, mental and physical disabilities, providing a stimulating environment for artistic instruction, gallery promotion and personal expression."

Part of Oakland's artistic success may be the result of its once a month [Oakland Art Murrmur](#). It's a "First Friday" meet and greet, for which 24 participating galleries located in relative proximity host receptions and open-house gatherings from 6 to 9 pm. "On First Friday you see thousands of people out in galleries and bars...for the last 5 or 6 years ago that didn't exist," says DeStabler. And in addition to the positive impact of First Fridays, he says "Jerry Brown's 10k initiative had a big impact on this as well." Of Brown, he says that "one of his primary goals was to create 10k units of housing within the city, particularly in the downtown. Some people were critical of that saying it's all about gentrification, not addressing entrenched problems in Oakland. But however you look at it, there are now people living in those buildings... despite a severe recession, more and more restaurants are going up because there are more people now, more arts organizations."

Matthew Draving, an artist who graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) with a BFA in Sculpture, is currently Assistant Director at [Johansson Projects](#). Draving, who arrived in Oakland in 2009, says he was "drawn to Johansson Projects for its consistently impressive shows, and very calculated yet unorthodox curation." In the larger scope of scene he appreciates other aspects of what's emerging, saying "I think the best change that I've seen is the emergence of small alternative spaces, which showcase local artists whose work might not be as easily sold, but is just as interesting...venues like Important Projects and Sight School keep

Oakland interesting for me, while providing developing artists an opportunity to get their name out there." Draving also believes the *Oakland Art Murmur* to be an important component. "It allows the socially inclined to get a glance at what each gallery is showing and to spread the word to their friends and families if they enjoyed the work. Another great aspect is the amazing independent vendors that line 23rd st. My favorite of which is some kids -- 7 or 8 years old I'm guessing -- selling zines they made for \$1. What a deal!" he says.

Indeed.

Heather Marie Henderson is an artist based in West Oakland, the oldest, most historic part of the city. Currently she's working as a fabricator for a monumental project spearheaded by artist -- [Mike Ross](#). The piece, entitled "Jet Kiss", is to be installed in the new Capitol Hill light rail station in Seattle. Henderson too is a fan of the *Oakland Art Murmur*. "Art Murmur gets great attendance, there are new mini-museums and galleries, small, independent market places, coffee shops... and that's where the 'scene' hangs out... the fact that the 'scene' is growing so fast shows that the city is becoming more accessible."

Danielle Fox likes what she sees happening in Oakland, as well, and like DeStabler, comes from a family of artists. Fox is the director of [Slate Gallery](#), located just north of Uptown Oakland in the "up-and-coming" neighborhood of Temescale. "I feel my role is very much the translator between the art and the artist; in an educational role or writing or interpreting an artist's work for people that come to the gallery... giving people access to it."



CB 9, 2008  
Limited edition digital chromogenic print, various sizes available



CB 6, 2008  
Limited edition digital chromogenic print, various sizes available



CB 7, 2008  
Limited edition digital chromogenic print, various sizes



STK 1, 2009  
Limited edition digital chromogenic print, various sizes

Carol Inez Charney exhibits at Slate Gallery (Image: Slate Gallery)

Having lots of art experiences within reach -- being easily accessible -- is a reoccurring theme. To this, Fox puts in perspective the need to balance community enthusiasm with long-term, economic viability. "It's funky, urban, edgy and cool and not super developed, that's what gives [Oakland] its uniqueness and character, and we don't want to lose that. Yet on the other hand, it's got to be able to sustain itself."

That's true. Yet for the time being, most everyone seem blissfully content; taking in this surprising new experience.