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PHOTOS BY AMEE BROOKER

## THE LITTLE GALLERY DOING BIG, WEIRD THINGS

BY ALIE WARD

Venture down York Boulevard past sun-bleached storefronts, an abandoned upholstery shop and a liquor market blasting a soccer match. Continue just beyond Troy's, the time-warped burger joint with Regan-era wood paneling, and down a sidewalk scattered with discarded lottery tickets. There you will discover Sea and Space Explorations, perhaps the coolest little gallery you've never heard of.

Reaching these uncharted environs demands familiarity with the 2 Freeway northbound—an odyssey for many Angelenos. But as gentrification spreads beyond Silverlake and Echo Park, territories farther east seem to be the burgeoning targets of the artistically inclined. Scrappy Highland Park, a diverse working- and middle-class neighborhood historically plagued by gangs, is home to a jumble of auto body shops, family-owned markets and storefront art studios. And, of course, Sea and Space.

It's Super Bowl Sunday, just days before the gallery opens its second annual Sound in Space series of sonic art events. The owner and artistic director, 36-year-old CalArts alum Lara Bank, sits on the floor of the all-white apartment-sized gallery in tattered velour track pants, surrounded by errant hardware, audio cables and a Corgi named Foxy. Bank founded Sea and Space in 2007, though she was no stranger to the area. "I already lived in the neighborhood and had an art studio here for six years," she says. "And I love Highland Park. This place is home."

In its brief existence, Sea and Space has earned murmurs around the L.A. art scene with its innovative participatory exhibits. At last year's ArtSpa show, patrons could opt for a free massage while being serenaded by a volunteer cellist. There was also a night dedicated to artsy nudity and an interactive iPod Shuffle performance. When pressed for a description of the gallery's aesthetic, Bank offers "conceptual, relational, political, theoretical," though the works tend to defy easy classification.

Today, Bank has an exhaustive to-do list. The first order of business is erecting an indoor Jacuzzi—or rather, a "deluxe portable spa," as she is quick to correct. Exhibit co-curator Clay Chaplin, with a wide smile and a mop of hair, deems the plastic whirlpool "super-classy" and notes, "Everyone's invited to take a soak." Aaron Drake, another co-curator, simply says, "Hot-tub party." Drake plans to submerge, almost baptismally, a waterproof speaker dangling from a fishing pole during the exhibit's opening night.

For the rest of the gallery's monthlong stab at the sonic arts, Bank, Chaplin and Drake have programmed an offbeat art enthusiast's dream. Among the highlights planned are a set by noise saxophonist Ulrich Krieger, a group hum session, an a cappella heavy-metal singing competition, and a bagpipe lecture titled "Pipes and Bladders."

Events scheduled for Friday the 13th involve a Ouija board session and a hex lifting, to be followed by a group trance led by a woman who, according to Drake, "spent last summer practicing hypnosis on chickens before they were slaughtered." He adds, "This is her premiere human group hypnosis," though Chaplin, asked to confirm, falters: "Um...Aaron said that? That may not be factual."

Another evening promises Arthur Jarvinen's theatrical vignettes of "physical poetry," a night of one-man bands called "OMB like OMGI," a closing-night slumber party, and nightly "shedstallation" sound pieces taking place in the acoustic confines of a tool shed on the outdoor patio. "We might have to bring a space heater in there," Bank wonders aloud.

But before all this, the hot tub must be inflated and tested, video projectors installed, and work wrangled from the long roster of participating artists. Bank laments her lack of a staff or an intern. "I do everything my fucking self!" she wails through a rueful laugh.

Despite the tragic irony of her surname, Bank is no fountain of money. Financing for Sea and Space comes primarily from private donations—and from Bank's personal



Clay Chaplin, Sea and Space owner Lara Bank, and Aaron Drake

funds, which are supplemented by her teaching art part time at Otis and other colleges.

Atop a mound of controlled clutter in her studio space, which is tucked into a walled-off corner of the gallery, sits a workbook on establishing a nonprofit organization. That status isn't official yet, but Bank pats a packet of forms on a nearby bookshelf and says the paperwork is about ready to go. She's not excited about the Man having a say in what her gallery can or can't do. (She notes with an eye roll that "raffles are considered gambling, so now we have to have 'auctions.'") But she is hoping the tax breaks will ease the burden of operating costs.

"Our survival in the far future is dependent upon donations and grants," she says. "But I pay—and am prepared to pay—out of pocket for the next couple of years. It costs about \$12,000 a year." She adds, "I run a tight budget."

In a media-obsessed town where comic-book artists sell out shows before they're hung, operating an art space dedicated to free sound experiments, performance pieces and non-commercial artwork doesn't point to huge financial gains. Bank unabashedly reveals on the Sea and Space website that "the gallery made less than \$200 on sales last year."

But the most courageous work in the Los Angeles art scene is gravitating toward participatory art rather than pieces purchased to hang over the couch. Recognizing that, Bank says, "I wanted the space to be more of an experience and an exploration than a showcase."

So experiential art involves portable hot tubs; sounds like a step in the right direction. Are these the types of explorations she had in mind when she dubbed the gallery Sea and Space?

"There is absolutely nothing random about the gallery name. It relates to the two spheres that bracket us...They represent the unknown and unknowable. I spent months contemplating it."

Reclining in a lawn chair amid the preshow chaos, Bank admits that, despite the frenzied schedule, running Sea and Space is "deeply, deeply satisfying." She looks over at the deluxe portable spa and the tangle of speaker wires and sighs, then erupts into a rolling laugh. "It's pretty much like therapy."

\*"Sound in Space" takes place Thurs.-Sun. through Feb. 28 at Sea and Space Explorations, 4755 York Blvd., Highland Park.