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DCist Interview: Paul So, Hamiltonian Founder

John James Anderson

At the end of August, young folks throughout D.C. will have the opportunity to apply for the Hamiltonian Fellowship, a two year program that offers emerging artists further professional development and exposure of their work in the Hamiltonian Gallery, currently under construction at the corner of 14th and U streets NW. The Hamiltonian Fellowship and Gallery is the brainchild of Paul So, a physics professor at George Mason University.

While it may seem odd that a physics professor is becoming an arts entrepreneur, So's scholastic interests in the arts date back to his college education in Claremont, California. While finishing up his BS at Harvey Mudd College, he was taking art classes at nearby Scripps College, eventually earning a BA in painting. Though art took a backseat in his professional development, it has remained a keen interest of his since leaving California more than a decade ago. DCist approached Paul So to better connect these two interests and to find out more about this opportunity.

How does your background in physics apply toward this gallery and fellowship?

I want to set up a system for artists. In the sciences — after you earn your PhD — there is a research period of 2-3 years. Then you are associated with a professor, and he tells you how to write grants and get jobs. You can focus on your research but also focus on the career development – how to get a job in the sciences. I like that in the sciences, but when I look around in the artistic world, you don't have that. I want to combine the two, so artists can benefit the experience I had in the sciences.

How will the Foundation and Gallery operate and what is your role?

I am the motivator, the founder. I'll hire one gallery manager and one person to run the non-profit. In addition there will be professors and other gallery managers coming in monthly as lecturers. There will be a mentorship program involved. I don't just want it to be a place where the fellows give me their work and say, "show it." I want them to be involved in the aspects of career development.

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