



Entrepreneurs

Democratizing The Art World

By Maureen Farrell, 6:00 PM ET

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Chris Vroom is the kind of ex-investment banker a starving artist can love.

Back in 1999, Vroom launched **Artadia**, a nonprofit devoted to discovering new artists in unlikely locales. Vroom wants to do for aspiring artists what Sundance and other national film festivals have done for filmmakers.

It's a daunting mission: Like Wall Street, the art world is a very clubby, opaque and cut-throat one—and by no means a meritocracy. For artists, timing, connections and luck are everything. And that means throngs of talented folks are left outside looking in.

Enter **Artadia**, which aims to introduce healthy competition by hosting biannual contests for visual artists—painters, sculptors, photographers and videographers—in San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, Boston and, later this summer, Atlanta. Vroom's goal: to open up an imperfect market mainly controlled by a handful of powerful gallery owners and collectors in New York, Los Angeles, Berlin and London.

"The art market is a \$50 billion business with zero transparency where insider trading is allowed," says Vroom, 43, now a portfolio manager at Roanoke Asset Management in Manhattan. "I felt like we could break down some of the anti-competitive barriers. Terrific art is going on in every community in America and around the world."

While by no means looking to displace gallery owners, **Artadia** at least offers aspiring artists some helpful exposure and advice. Shaun O'Dell, a 39-year-old San Francisco-based multimedia artist and 2005 **Artadia** award winner, says he tapped the nonprofit to learn about individual idiosyncrasies of certain gallery owners. "It's a tricky sort of world to navigate if you're not in New York," he says. "There's a lot of weird etiquette and signals to pick up on."

In the last nine years, roughly 9,000 artists have applied to Artadia's competitions, judged by curators from major museums. Each contest is like "a little IPO [as in, the initial public offering of a stock]" for the artists, says Vroom. "We launch them and give them after-market support."

This year **Artadia** judges will choose 20 artists to receive \$110,000 in total prize money (six \$15,000 awards and 14 \$1,500 awards). Sixty percent of **Artadia**'s \$500,000 annual operating budget goes toward supporting past winners—through marketing materials, studio exhibitions, networking cocktail parties, lecture series and a book of award winners flogged at city art fairs. Next summer, Vroom, who has sunk \$2.5 million of his own stash into **Artadia**, will co-sponsor a three-month residency in New

York, backed by \$25,000 from the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts (which **Artadia** will match). He plans to expand to five more cities in the next few years.

"It's a minor league system that's feeding into the pros," says Larry Fields, an **Artadia** board member who is also on the board of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. "Once you're on **Artadia's** radar screen, you're on the radar screen of people around the country."

Of the hundreds of submissions **Artadia** receives for each competition, only 15 make the cut to the second round. At that point, the judges visit each of the artists' studios for a closer, more meaningful look.

Those trips can forge some strong connections. Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, the director and chief curator at the Aspen Art Museum and a judge in the Houston **Artadia** awards, says that was particularly true in the case of artist Brent Steen back in 2003. "He worked on primarily blank canvases and drew in pencil," she says. "It was a very simple narrative. It just made me feel so sad." Moved, Jacobson included Steen in a 2006 exhibit called "Belief and Doubt."

Another Houstonite, photographer Amy Blakemore was teaching in several local art schools and snapping pictures on the side. Though represented by a Houston gallery, Blakemore still felt like an outsider in her own city, let alone an epicenter like New York. "I was basically pretty invisible," she says. "I don't do a lot of self-promotion. I get really nervous to talk about my work because I don't have the art lingo down. I always feel like a bit of an impostor."

After winning a 2004 **Artadia** award, Blakemore feels a bit more legit. In 2006, a juror at **Artadia's** 2004 Houston competition chose Blakemore's work for the Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan, one of the contemporary art world's highest honors. "There's no way I would have ever met anyone from the Whitney without **Artadia**," she says.

In some cases, a good showing at **Artadia** can put quality work on collectors' radars, too. Since winning at a 2002 **Artadia** contest, Julio Morales, a San Francisco artist, has been peddling paintings on his own--thus avoiding the steep fees charged by gallery owners, often 50% of the work's sale price. Without **Artadia**, says Morales, "I wouldn't have had access to these curators and collectors unless I was represented by a gallery."

In Pictures: How **Artadia** Put These Five Artists On The Map



Decoding The Art World

Gallery owners have a lot of power in the art world. These often inscrutable middlemen attract the eyeballs and lend credibility to the work. While by no means looking to displace gallery owners, **Artadia** at least offers aspiring artists helpful exposure and advice. Shaun O'Dell, a 39-year-old San Francisco-based multimedia artist and 2005 **Artadia** award winner, says he tapped the nonprofit to learn about individual idiosyncrasies of certain gallery owners. "It's a tricky sort of world to navigate if you're not in New York," he says. "There's a lot of weird etiquette and signals to pick up on." O'Dell's work is now part of the permanent collections at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Shaun O'Dell
The Sound of the Kingdom of the Kingdom of Sound (b), 2007
Courtesy of the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

Queuing Up The Curators



A critical part of the **Artadia** process is bringing the judges to artists' studios during the final round of competition. Many judges, who are also curators at major museums, say this gives them an opportunity to understand an artist's work in a way they couldn't by simply seeing the images reproduced as slides. Heidi Zuckerman Jacobson, the director and chief curator at the Aspen Art Museum and a judge in the Houston **Artadia** awards, says this was particularly true in the case of Houston artist and award winner Brent Steen. "He worked on primarily blank canvases and drew in pencil," she says. "It was a very simple narrative. It just made me feel so sad." Moved, Jacobson included Steen in a 2006 exhibit called "Belief and Doubt."

Brent Steen
Wilderness of Mirrors, 2007
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston, TX



Showing Them The Money

While **Artadia**'s grants to contest winners are relatively small (\$15,000 for six artists and \$1,500 for 14 others), some artists claim that these paltry sums have kept them from selling out. "I was having doubts about the 'sale-ability' of the work I was making at the time," says Bill O'Brien of Chicago, a 2006 **Artadia** winner. "[The prize money] basically empowered me to make the work that's important to me, even if it's not easily sold." O'Brien's sculptures--made of string, carpet, glue and found objects--were featured, along with other artists' works, in the Barbara Gladstone gallery in Manhattan this fall. Roberta Smith, an art critic for *The New York Times*, said O'Brien's work "made the biggest splash" in the entire exhibit.

William J. O'Brien
Untitled, 2008
Courtesy of Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago

Creating New Art Hubs

Curators don't have time to turn over every rock looking for the next Gauguin. That's why they tend to hunt for talent in the same places. Show them a new place brimming with great work, though, and it might just become a destination spot. The increased exposure also gives artists a reason to stay in an area, shoring up its culture quotient. Unlike many of her fellow artists, Amy Blakemore, a Houston-based photographer and 2004 **Artadia** award winner, resisted the urge to flee the south for New York. "In Houston I could do my work and live cheaply," she says. In 2006, an **Artadia** juror in the 2004 Houston awards competition chose Blakemore's work for the Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan—one of the contemporary art world's highest honors.



Amy Blakemore
Billy, 2007
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

Opening Other Channels

Gallery owners have power, but so do big-time art collectors—and a good showing at **Artadia** can put quality work on these taste-makers' radars. Better yet, artists don't have to hand over 50% of their work's sale price. Since winning at a 2002 **Artadia** contest, Julio Morales, a San Francisco artist, has been peddling paintings on his own. "I wouldn't have had access to these curators and collectors unless I was represented by a gallery," he says.



Julio Morales, Courtesy of the artist