

## Ten Galleries Whose Founders Quit The Big City To Become Cultural Trailblazers in the Heartland

by Laura van Straaten

“I’m the Gagosian of Memphis now,” jokes Matt Ducklo whose gallery Tops recently expanded to a second space. Six years ago, he opened the first location in the basement of a printing and stained-glass factory — to get down there, it’s a treacherous spelunk through a junk-filled hallway. The newer location is tucked into a small park nearby. Of course, the foot traffic in Memphis doesn’t quite compare to the throngs of gallerygoers in Chelsea. “If five people show up on a Saturday, I’m happy,” admits Ducklo.



Exterior view of Institute 193, Lexington, Kentucky. Photo: Courtesy Institute 193

After an MFA at Yale and almost a decadelong career in photography in New York, economic pressures forced Ducklo to reconsider his priorities, “I thought, My goal in life was not to live in New York City but to do creative things, he recalls. He headed home to Tennessee where he quickly discovered, as he puts it, “the joy and despair of having a gallery that is far from a major art capital.”

Ducklo’s in good company. He is one of ten gallerists I’ve discovered over the last few years who renounced their big-city careers on the coasts to create new art spaces in their heartland hometowns, or, in one case, the small town where a spouse’s career is. I first met most of these gallerists at art fairs like those opening next week in Miami — including NADA, Untitled, Pulse, and others in New York and even internationally. As I make the rounds, I’m always impressed when I look up from admiring artwork to peer around the edge of the booth and see the little sign indicating that a gallery is headquartered in one of the smaller U.S. cities. And I wonder, How do they make it work?

As Guido Maus, whose namesake gallery is in Alabama, summed it up with a laugh: “My biggest disadvantage is my location, and my biggest advantage is my location.” While big cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco may have robust institutional ecosystems devoted wholly to contemporary art — museums, patrons, collectors, media to cover it all — globalization and gentrification have created a climate where even as those centers and many big commercial galleries are expanding, smaller galleries are having a harder and harder time finding financial sustainability.

For gallerists who make the leap and open up an arts space in, say, Alabama or Arkansas, they often find themselves pioneers in bringing new forms of art to communities unfamiliar with the conversations

and preoccupations of the art world. The gallerists serve as ambassadors both to and from the larger art world, even as they are also sometimes foot soldiers in the culture wars raging, especially in the wake of the 2016 election; the artwork they show often represents blue-state and big-city values, ideas, and interests, sometimes amid a sea of red.



John Riepenhoff, who runs Green Gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Artwork by Peter Barrickman. Photo: Myrica von Haselberg/Courtesy of The Green Gallery.



Green Gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin is a contemporary art space housed in a former drive through. Photo: Myrica von Haselberg/Courtesy of The Green Gallery.

These galleries typically exhibit contemporary artists working with the same rigor as those represented by big-city galleries, sometimes with some self-taught “outsider” artists thrown in the mix, too. Chandra Johnson, who founded SOCO in Charlotte, North Carolina, echoes many of the gallerists I interviewed, explaining her goal is to try to “bring in incredible artists working all over the world and discover talented regional artists and push them out into the world.”

John Riepenhoff, who runs Green Gallery in Milwaukee, points out the role that the internet has played in making galleries like his possible. Riepenhoff links the blossoming of these galleries to a wider “decentralization of cultural authorship.”

The native Milwaukeean notes that the rising cost of big-city living makes experimentation riskier. “There is a trade-off when you enter into avant-garde culture in Middle America,” he says. “There may not be as much support and infrastructure, but there is a lower cost of living, and the expectations for art and culture are such a different dynamic that you can almost invent your own species of cultural breed in a very short gestation period.” In other words, there is room to create something new.

And while they’re saving money on rent basing their galleries outside of major centers, there are still bills to pay. International art fairs are one way to sell artwork outside of their immediate communities, although it’s a big financial risk — plane tickets, shipping costs, plus there are fees to participate. “Though the fairs bring us collectors,” says John Pollard of ADA Gallery in Richmond, Virginia, “they cost us a small fortune, so it’s a gamble.”

Talking to me for this article was another instance when these gallerists had to weigh the risks and rewards. Several were afraid of being “too honest” about the challenges they face in the broader cultural landscape of their region or coming across as “arrogant” when asked to catalogue their successes. More than one cautioned that modesty, humility, and understatement are cultural values in their communities in a way they are not in the broader art world or in New York. Reassurances were needed — of my own heartland roots (in Illinois and Kentucky) and of my editor’s. Ultimately, what won out was a chance to let the broader world know, as Ducklo puts it, “that there is compelling art being shown and made in the middle of the country.”

Here's more from the founders of ten contemporary art galleries between the coasts: ADA in Richmond, Virginia; Everybody in Tucson, Arizona; Good Weather in North Little Rock, Arkansas; Green Gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Institute 193 in Lexington, Kentucky; Maus Contemporary in Birmingham, Alabama; Parapet Real Humans in St. Louis, Missouri; SOCO Gallery in Charlotte, North Carolina; Tif Sigfrids Gallery in Athens, Georgia; and Tops in Memphis, Tennessee.



Installation view: Patrick Thorne, "Dumb Company" at ADA. Photo: John Pollard



Chandra Johnson, gallery owner, SOCO. Photo: Ingr, courtesy of SOCO Gallery

Founder John Pollard describes ADA in Richmond, Virginia, as a “for profit” gallery, before adding a self-deprecating dig, “Insert laughter here!” The 1,500-square-foot gallery, celebrating its 15th anniversary this year, is in Richmond’s downtown, a stone’s throw from Virginia Commonwealth University. Last April, the school opened the Institute for Contemporary Art, the first institution in the area devoted to contemporary art. “There’s more art than you’d expect here,” Pollard says.

Born and raised in Virginia, Pollard went to school in San Francisco in the 1990s, where he earned an MFA in painting while working at an avant-garde film-and-video nonprofit. After he graduated, Pollard recalls, “I was about to start a gallery in San Francisco and the landlord sold the building.” With his plans disrupted, he came back to Virginia and started a gallery instead in Richmond, considered the big city compared to his nearby hometown of Petersburg.

“My gallery was a mission to take some of the elitism out of art, and gallery-going, and open it up for everyone,” he says. “While that is not such a new concept now, it felt very new in 2003.”

The gallery’s program is heavy on painting and drawing, but the artists hail from different places. “I show a third from California, from my connections there, a third who are based in New York — though that can mean that they are from Queens, Kansas City, or Copenhagen, of course — and then a third from Virginia and the South.”

Pollard says he just shows what he loves, but what he loves is often underrepresented, challenging, and off-putting. “I guess I’m an accidental provocateur.” The gallery’s next show, opening December 7, features work by Thaddeus LaCrette, who was a tailor in his native Grenada before moving to New York. LaCrette became interested in African beadwork and spent about 25 years creating the work on view, which uses nearly 3 million beads. Pollard says the work is “about the slave trade and an imaginary king and queen of the Masai tribe and the tales of leaving Africa for parts and ports unknown.”

Pollard’s biggest challenge is selling work. “I’m not a salesman, and we don’t show easy work to place.” He concedes that sometimes what he shows is “too expensive for Richmond,” though he hastens to add that his pricing is a bargain for, say, New York collectors. For over a decade, Pollard says he’s been going to the fairs to meet collectors. And though a death in the family is keeping him away from Miami this month, where he usually shows at Untitled, he’s hoping to participate in one of the fairs in New York in March.



Andrew Shuta co-founded Everybody in Tucson, Arizona, with his friends Christian Ramirez and Alex Von Bergen in 2015. The expansion and revitalization of downtown Tucson had changed the gallery landscape. “The community experienced a loss of affordable spaces and the subsequent dissolution of many small contemporary art galleries,” explains Shuta, leaving essentially ones that mostly focused on regional-style art. “We were very short on contemporary galleries.”

Shuta met Von Bergen when they were both students at the University of Arizona’s graduate art program. Back then Von Bergen and Ramirez, working at MOCA Tucson, were throwing pop-up art shows around downtown. The three joined forces and found what they’d hoped would be a permanent home for their gallery in a nearly century-old warehouse downtown that had been newly redeveloped as an arts center. The trio self-funded 13 shows featuring emerging and established artists, including New Yorker Servane Mary and locals like Elliott J. Robbins and Jocko Weyland (then serving as chief curator of MOCA Tucson).



Installation view of the group show “Drawings, Paintings, Maybe a Sculpture” at Everybody gallery. Photo: Maya Hawk



Installation view: Dylan Spaysky, “Wicker and Diapers” (February 25–April 8, 2017) at Good Weather, North Little Rock. Photo: Image courtesy of the artist and Good Weather; North Little Rock

But other tenants and the nonprofit that developed the warehouse were, according to Shuta, on a different “crafty, tchotchke” wavelength. He says it’s a predicament small-town contemporary galleries face, having to decide whether to align with or against this regional dialect. Choosing the latter, the three partners are now looking for a new home for their gallery. They’re considering reopening in Chicago or Phoenix where Von Bergen and Ramirez have respectively moved. Meanwhile, for 2019, Everybody is planning pop-up shows in those cities, as well as Tucson and New York. Though they exhibited in NADA New York last spring, Shuta said, they are waiting to do more fairs until they can afford them.

After earning his MFA in Detroit, Haynes Riley returned home to Arkansas and founded Good Weather in a family member’s one-car garage in a suburban neighborhood in North Little Rock. Riley describes the nontraditional art space as “both a curatorially led, artist-run space and commercial gallery.” Riley wanted to inspire a kind of contemporary art discourse and community similar to the one he’d found at Cranbrook Academy of Art. He considered moving back to New York where he’d lived before for a couple of years, but he explains, “It wasn’t financially viable.”

In seven years, Good Weather has presented 38 solo exhibitions locally and organized group and solo exhibitions in more than 20 locations nationally and internationally.

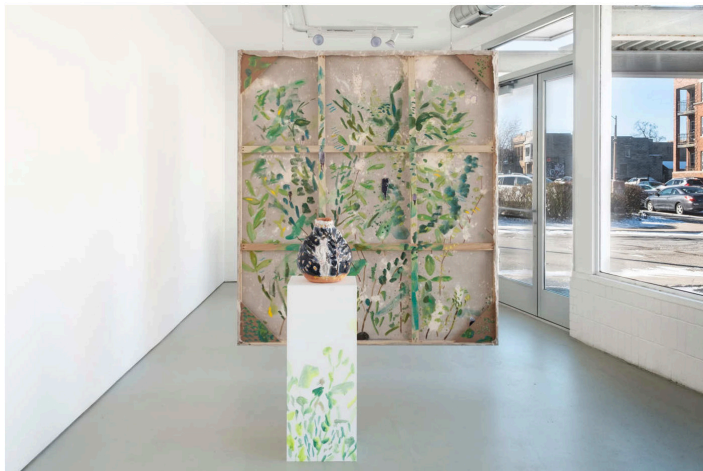
“The people that came the first year to our shows had never been to an art space before,” says Riley. “They weren’t familiar with the idea of not buying, of going to have an experience.” And exhibiting more conceptual or intellectually tinged work posed a challenge. “It was an uninitiated audience,” he says.

“People have expressed that work can be distancing, it can make you feel dumb if you don’t know,” he says. He tries to mitigate that as much as possible by operating “without pretension.”

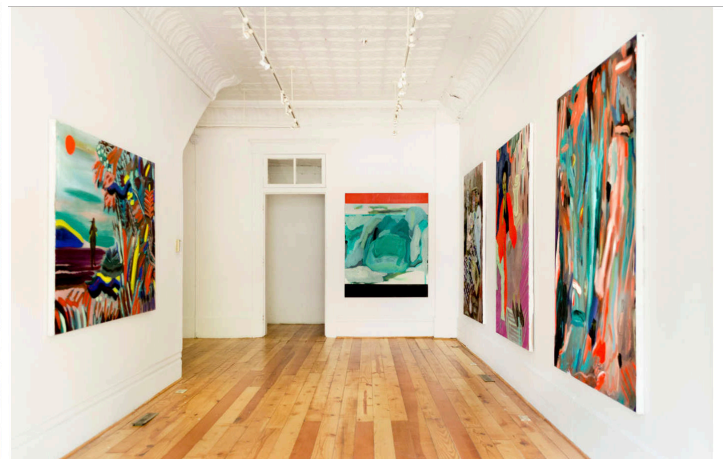
He’s seen a shift, even among immediate family members, who he says have pretty conservative ideas of what constitutes art. “As we have grown, the audience has become more initiated.”

Even with that modest triumph, he still feels “on the periphery of the art world, even in Arkansas.” Crystal Bridges is one of the closest museums, but it’s still three hours away. “Most of Arkansas is a red state, but it’s very fractured,” he says, explaining that Pulaski County, where he is, tends to be less conservative than the state as a whole, and none of the other galleries participate in the art-world discourses and debates that exist outside of the region.

It’s a challenge to find the discourse and community he’d sought. As in many heartland towns, there is no local art critic to review the gallery’s shows. Instead, he is grateful if a local art blogger shares news of his exhibition with quotes from the press releases he sends out to try to contextualize the artwork, even though he says they often insert into their posts “snippy comments like ‘whatever that means.’”



Installation view: Mari Eastman and Jennifer Rochlin, “Paintings and Pots” at Green Gallery. Photo: Myrica von Haselberg/Courtesy of The Green Gallery.



Installation view of Melissa Carter, “New Masters” at Institute 193. Photo: Courtesy Institute 193

Both a garage gallery and a traveling curatorial project, Good Weather has organized exhibitions in places as diverse as Portland, Oregon; St. Louis, Missouri; Mexico City; and Monaco. William Marcellus Armstrong and Anthony Campuzano’s *Floral Concepts* is on view through December 15, hosted at Vernon Gardens in Los Angeles.

And his budget? “It’s nonexistent,” he says. “If we sell work, we can afford to go to the next fair.” Riley has participated in fairs in Mexico, New York, and London, and this will be Good Weather’s third year in a row exhibiting at NADA Miami. But in a first, to save on booth fees, the gallery will be presenting work in the bathrooms of the fair.

John Riepenhoff started Green Gallery in his hometown of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2004. The gallery is housed in what had been a drive-through, first for dry cleaning, later for fast food. He laughs, “We had to jackhammer out an old grease trap.”

For Riepenhoff, it’s important to bring in artists from elsewhere because it helps regional artists see their own culture afresh. And he thinks that can also build confidence. “Being in the Midwest in general, we have incredibly rich culture, but there is a bit of a low-self-esteem issue,” he says, “where we don’t acknowledge our own value as a culture, our cultural worth.”

Green Gallery has a two-person show on view now through December 22, featuring paintings by

Chicago-based Mari Eastman and ceramics by L.A.-based Jennifer Rochlin. Riepenhoff feels an obligation to amplify diverse voices because “even though economically we’re not a big institution, culturally we are a big institution.”

Additionally, he feels “a responsibility to be a cultural attaché to other parts of the world.” For Riepenhoff, fairs are the perfect opportunity. He once participated in six to seven international fairs a year, but he’s cut back. At NADA in Miami next week, Green Gallery will exhibit a half-dozen artists, including work by Eastman, as well as Sheila Held and artist and curator Michelle Grabner (both based in Milwaukee).

Phillip March Jones has deep southern roots, but he spent years living in New York. There, he’d sometimes ask his art-world friends What do you think of the South? “They would say, ‘I don’t,’” he recalls with a laugh. When he pressed them on the subject, he says, the responses were “usually not a positive sense of the region.” That’s something Jones seeks to change.

Jones founded Institute 193 in his hometown of Lexington to “document the cultural landscape of the modern South.” He recently presented “An Antidote to Nature’s Ruin on this Heavenly Globe” at the gallery with prints and video from the early 1980s by artist Stephen Varble, a Kentucky native who died of complications from AIDS in 1984.



Catherine Tafur,  
*Plague* (2017):  
archival ink (Sakura  
Pigma Micron pen)  
on paper. Photo:  
Image courtesy of  
Catherine Tafur and  
Maus Contemporary



Installation view: Karin Schneider, *Situational Diagram* at Parapet Real Humans. Photo: Courtesy of Parapet Real Humans

“We have a political responsibility — I won’t say agenda — to the region, and we provide something that very few other places can,” says Jones, who notes that Kentucky is Rand Paul and Mitch McConnell territory. The desire to offer an alternative point of view and challenge his audience informs Jones’s exhibition choices. “We did a show early on that dealt with Big Coal,” which is a major industry in the region. He admits, “We did get some pushback.”

Institute 193 received a \$50,000 grant from the the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, which Jones notes is nearly a year’s budget for the gallery. Earlier this fall, Jones opened an outpost of the gallery in New York’s East Village, which he sees as a “permanent bridge between the South and the larger world.” For the New York space’s inaugural show, Jones was thrilled that curators and collectors attended who, he says, “I don’t think in another ten years I would get to come down to Kentucky.”

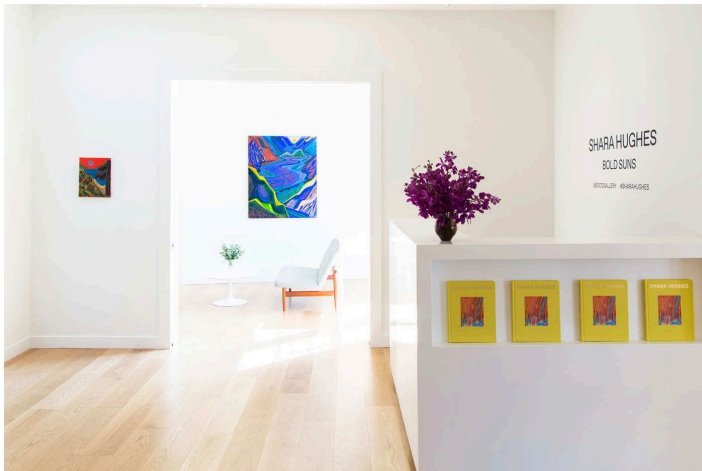
Through January 1, the New York space is showing ceramic sculptures of tools made by the Mississippi-born John Martin, who spent most of his childhood on his family’s farm in Arkansas and who has been working for more than three decades with Creative Growth, the nonprofit art studio in Oakland, California, that supports artists with developmental disabilities.



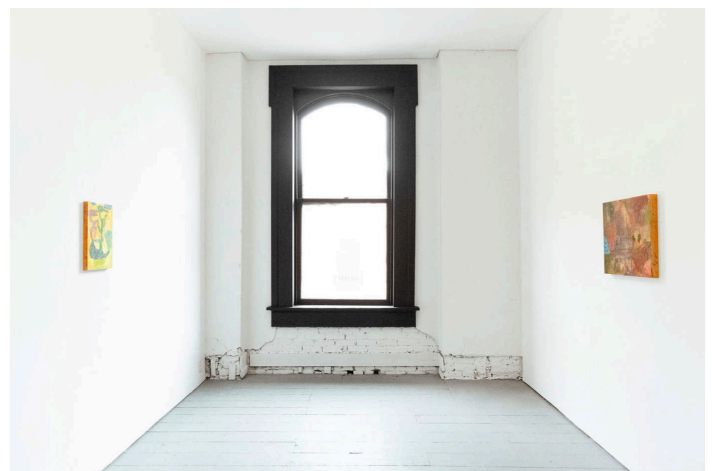
In years past, Jones's gallery has participated in fairs like NADA and the Outsider Art Fair in New York, but for the next few months, he's focused on programming the gallery's two spaces in New York and Lexington.

Belgian-born Guido Maus opened Maus Contemporary in Birmingham, Alabama, with an express sociopolitical focus, exploring race, civil rights, and feminism. "It is important to see what a region needs when it comes to dialogue," he says. "Don't forget that we are in the deep South, with everything that entails."

"The 2016 election has only amplified the vital need for programs such as ours," asserts Maus. The exhibition on view through December 14 is exactly the kind of programming he finds so essential. Georgia-native Travis Somerville's paintings and drawings examine America's history of white supremacy and racism, and the recent removal of Confederate monuments. Somerville's work combines drawing, painting, and the "restaging" of old advertisements and newspaper articles, using vintage moneybags and cotton sacks as canvas.



Installation view: Shara Hughes, *Bold Suns* at SOCO. Photo: Image courtesy of SOCO Gallery



Installation View: Andy Giannakakis, "The Gypsy" at Tif Sigfrids. Photo: Kristen Ashley MacCarthy

Somerville is one of seven artists whose work Maus will be exhibiting at Pulse in Miami next week. Fair participation is critical to Maus's business model. So far in 2018, he's exhibited at fairs in London, Paris, and Basel, as well as Berlin and Karlsruhe, Germany.

Artist Amy Granat describes her nonprofit gallery Parapet Real Humans in St. Louis, Missouri, as a very experimental project. "My own tastes have always been avant-garde, more new, more confusing, more divisive," she says.

Her No. 1 rule is that the artists she exhibits have to come to town and speak locally to the community. "But I'll be honest," she says, "most of the artists I bring to town have never been heard of here — the names don't mean anything."

But at this moment in the United States, she feels that "we are oversaturated with news and content that is typically highly politicized in nature and highly divisive." She says that divisions are especially deep between the urban and rural populations in the Midwest. So in curating shows, she leans toward art that will "not necessarily have to have any answers," but will encourage people "to look a little closer and ask questions." She wants to create a slower pace for introspection and a space for conversation rather than to "present the quick and neat package."

Through December 21, the gallery is showing work by New York–based Gavin Rayna Russom, who is also a musician best known for her work with LCD Soundsystem.

Right now, the gallery has no intention of participating in art fairs. “We wanted to create an atypical model, and see what might come of that.” Though they aren’t participating the traditional way, the gallery is co-hosting an event in February during the inaugural edition of the Frieze Art Fair in Los Angeles, which will also feature Granat’s own artwork.

While most of these heartland gallerists are returning to the states where they grew up, Chandra Johnson moved from New York to Charlotte, North Carolina, for her husband’s work. She’s married to NASCAR legend Jimmie Johnson, and Charlotte is home to the NASCAR Hall of Fame and near the Charlotte Motor Speedway. (When she joins him on the racing circuit, she makes time for studio visits.)

An avid collector who sits on several art boards in the region, Johnson started SOCO — short for Southern Comfort — after realizing there was not a space devoted to contemporary work in her new town. (It’s also a bookshop).



Installation view: “Island States,” a group show at Tops, featuring work by (from left to right) Brad Kahlhamer, Terri Phillips, and Derek Fordjour, with Anne Eastman’s sculpture in the front. Photo: Courtesy of Tops Gallery

Through January 4, the gallery is showing work by New York–based Robert Lazzarini that focuses on the home break-in to probe ideas of violence, criminality, and vulnerability in American culture and their relation to social unrest.

“I have seen a major shift in our community in the three years our gallery has opened,” Johnson wrote in an email while she was attending art fairs in Europe. “I felt ahead of my time opening a contemporary art space and bookshop in 2015, but I feel our audience has completely caught up to us.”

With good old southern hospitality in mind, Johnson likes to invite visiting artists. In the past, she’s hosted talks by top New York art adviser Maria Brito and the collectors Amy and John Phelan. “We are always thinking of ways to bring the broader art world to Charlotte.”

Exhibiting at the Untitled art fair in Miami has been important for SOCO the last few years, but until 2020, Johnson says she is forgoing fairs to focus on collaborations in the Charlotte community. Last spring, after 16 years in Los Angeles, Tif Sigfrids relocated her eponymous gallery to Athens, Geo

rgia. “There’s no highway that goes through here. If you are coming to Athens, it’s because you are making a point to do so,” she says.

Sigfrids lived in Athens as a teen, and discovered a blossoming art ecosystem adjacent to the college town’s renowned music scene. But in spite of all the creativity, she says that until she set up shop, there wasn’t anybody in town participating in the major big-city art fairs or selling work to collectors in New York and Los Angeles.”



Sigfrids says that since her move to Georgia, art fairs have been more gratifying, and she plans to do even more. At Frieze New York this past spring, “I met every single person that had been to Athens, or had a family member in Athens.”

At their booth at NADA in Miami next week, Tif Sigfrids gallery will be showing Los Angeles–based artist Andy Giannakakis, a native of Valdosta, Georgia, whose solo show at the Athens gallery closes this weekend. The booth will also feature artists Mimi Lauter and Gracie DeVito, who have shows soon in Athens as well.

Matt Ducklo opened Tops gallery in Memphis in 2012. Located in the South Main neighborhood, it’s just around the corner from the Lorraine Hotel where Martin Luther King Jr., was assassinated, now the site of the National Civil Rights Museum. Ducklo named the gallery after another venerated local institution, Tops Bar-B-Q, figuring maybe he’d reach more people if they accidentally stumbled across his gallery either IRL or online when they were looking for a rack of ribs.

Ducklo says most of the visual art in his hometown fall into one of two categories: overtly political work that is inartful and obvious, or, more often, bad decorative paintings by people who cannot paint well. “It’s not like I have the most avant-garde interests — I can get into an landscape like anybody — but I see them charging New York prices,” he says, punctuating the observation with a sharp exhale.

“The South is more conservative and poor than other parts of the country,” says Ducklo. “The program of Tops does not ignore this, but it’s also not defined by it.” During the 2016 election, he exhibited photographer Judith Joy Ross’s “Portraits of the United States Congress, 1986–87.” “I kept Tops open on election night and set up a TV in the gallery,” Ducklo recalls. “No one showed up.”

Financial precarity is one of the gallery’s biggest obstacles. “I am operating on nothing. Everything is just a miracle to pull off,” he says. Gallerygoers often mistake the enterprise for a nonprofit. “This might be because of the nontraditional nature of the space and because there are not aggressive signifiers of commerce,” he hypothesizes. So, he improvises. “The wall between my personal account and the Tops account is a very porous wall,” he notes. To pay for a new gallery floor, he did some work for the flooring company. “I helped put in an epoxy floor in a Tennessee Air National Guard airplane hangar.”

Tops Gallery participated in its first fair earlier this year, the Outsider Art Fair in New York. And while the gallery’ll be returning January 2019, the experience was bittersweet. Ducklo’s booth was crowded with collectors, many from Europe, who knew, loved, and were quick to buy the work of Henry Speller, a self-taught African-American artist from the Mississippi Delta. But Ducklo kept thinking back to when he’d shown Speller’s artwork in Memphis, months prior: “It was one of the best shows that the gallery had organized, but the show received no press and there were no sales.” Press is difficult when the local newspaper doesn’t have an art critic anymore. “It’s a common story,” notes Ducklo, “of local excellence having to go elsewhere for attention and interest.”