

Ashton Bird dips into experimental art SOUP

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

Ashton Bird's artistic style is, in many ways, DIY. Philosophically, he's observed art as a do-it-yourself kind of craft. This resourcefulness was certainly put to the test when he walked into the old apartment building in Railroad Square that has since been transformed into SOUP Experimental. Bird's installation background gave him an eye to open the space up into a three-room gallery.

As founder and director of the gallery, Bird has always been interested in curating and making a space where students and other artists could gain valuable experience. He was also inspired by artist Gordon Matta-Clark in naming SOUP, an ode to the 1971 Manhattan restaurant, FOOD. The restaurant was a place where any artist, writer, musician, dancer, or chef, could come together and share in their art and a reasonably priced meal.

"The idea behind SOUP is to make up its own definition of a gallery and what a gallery can do," says Bird. "I want it to be all encompassing."

A South Dakota native, a younger Bird thought art only consisted of painting and drawing, both mediums in which he was proficient. His early works took to more lighthearted subject matter — Pokémon and Zelda characters — until he found a new focus in ceramics while attending Minnesota State University. It was there that he met significant mentors, Todd Shanafelt, Mika Laidlaw, and Liz Miller.

Taking a beginning hand-building course, Bird worked with clay for the first time. He says that the art program's approach to ceramics allowed him to look at the medium in new ways, seeing how the clay reacts to the space around it versus simply manipulating it into shapes. It was through this exploration that Bird found his interests in sculpture and installation artwork.

"It's transforming a space so you walk in and experience a different feeling or a moment," explains Bird. "My installation artwork is about evoking an experience and forcing the participant into moving in a certain direction, thinking in a certain way, and then thinking in a different way once they reach an object. It activates or reactivates a site specific space where a participant has to walk in to experience the artwork."

Looking back at past works, he references



The halls of SOUP Experimental on display.



Ashton Bird, founder and owner of SOUP Experimental in Railroad Square.

"Exploit Subject," a collaborative work that consisted of a giant clay wall. Participants would view the wall while being filmed by a hidden camera, and after going behind the wall would discover a television where they could then view others, viewing the wall.

Bird went on to receive his BFA in ceramics, and apprenticed under a ceramics master, Chul-Soo Kim, in South Korea for six weeks. Upon his return, he took an internship with Tom and Wanda Clark at Dakota Pottery in Sioux Falls. There he learned mold making, as the National Park Service commissioned the business to craft sculptures for various monuments, such as Wyoming's Devil's Tower.

"There are no guidelines to make those pieces," explains Bird. "Tom would always say to just figure it out, and if you mess up, to accept that you messed up and then ask for directions."

In 2015, he received the South Dakota Artist Career Development Grant, and premiered his first solo exhibition, "A

Human Record." The installation created an immersive experience that dealt with found and fabricated objects that showcased the anonymous marks of previous owners.

Specifically, Bird homed in on mattresses as personal records of human activity. He recounts that people are born on and pass away on mattresses, the private item containing imprints of humanity in its many forms. Additionally, he found wood from old houses and aged new wood to compose rural imagery, igniting discussions amongst viewers.

"The work had a very domestic feeling to it with all the formal qualities of art, but it was more about how the work alluded to specific moments of your life," says Bird. "A certain section looked like a basement, a very cozy portion, and we had many participants walk through who started having conversations about their grandma's house. It was more about the conversation than the composition."



IF YOU GO

What: Space and Charm May Exhibition

When: Gallery Hours, 5-9pm, Fridays and Saturdays, May 6-28th

Where: SOUP Experimental, 694-2 Industrial Drive, Tallahassee, FL 32310

Cost: Free
Contact: For more information please contact soupexperimental@gmail.com or visit soupexperimental.com

out new work," says Bird. "I've been motivated to make better work. I'm cultivating this side of my brain that's really professional and when I bring that into the studio it's making me recognize why I'm doing certain things and how I can get to the end result."

Dedicating a good majority of his time to SOUP, the gallery had its official opening in February and is now prepared for a full summer of exhibitions by local and national artists. Starting off in May with "Space and Charm," Bird is especially looking forward to May 10th when SOUP will host its first national visiting artist, Carnegie Mellon BFA graduate, Hannah G. Thompson. She will perform alongside a live video broadcast from an FSU artist in NYC, as well as local exhibitors.

SOUP's proposals and performances are accepted on a rolling basis with Bird enlisting help as his gallery has grown more quickly than he expected. Alongside

Recently, Bird started applying his knowledge of molds in his newest works as an MFA student at Florida State University. Using a combination of wood, plaster, and cement molds, he describes himself as a process-oriented artist with a current proclivity towards minimalist and sculptural installations. He takes inspiration, again from Gordon Matta-Clark, with "splitting" or opening houses by cutting them in half as part of an anti-architecture movement.

These works would create buzzing conversation, something that Bird finds to be an important component of art making, with many visitors feeling as if they were part of a mysterious secret. These ideas come forward in Bird's newest work where one can begin to see the inside of a structure, revealing the underlying scaffolding in the imprints wood leaves behind in plaster and concrete.

"I've been cranking

co-director, Brittany M. Watkins, ten new interns, and a burgeoning collective, Bird's plan for SOUP stands on three pillars: to establish the gallery's national and international presence; to continue archiving artist exhibitions and creative projects; and finally, to provide a platform for artists' experimental ideas and help creators of all experiences.

"We just want to be kind and cordial and become a professional resource for new and emerging creators, experimenters, and artists," says Bird. "It's most important to be open to anyone. Other artists inspire me, not only in what I'm creating, but to see how many people can make something different."

Among other projects, Bird and his staff will begin cultivating a SOUP community garden in June, compiling a hard copy archive of annual selected works, and help BFA students like FSU's printmaking class to receive professional critiques. Bird's thankful to FSU for two grants received towards these goals, as well as his Railroad Square neighbors who have helped him along the way.

Opening the gallery space has taught him how to find creative answers and solutions with everything from demolishing a shower, to installing a sink, to leveling a wall. Bird says traveling from South Dakota to Florida was a giant leap, but one that has given him confidence. He recognizes the ambitious goals he's set forth for SOUP and is ready to meet them head on.

"I think if you set your bar at this impossible state, maybe you'll never reach it, but you'll still push yourself to always keep reaching," says Bird. "I like to challenge myself to see how far I can push that. I don't ever want to be comfortable."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).

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