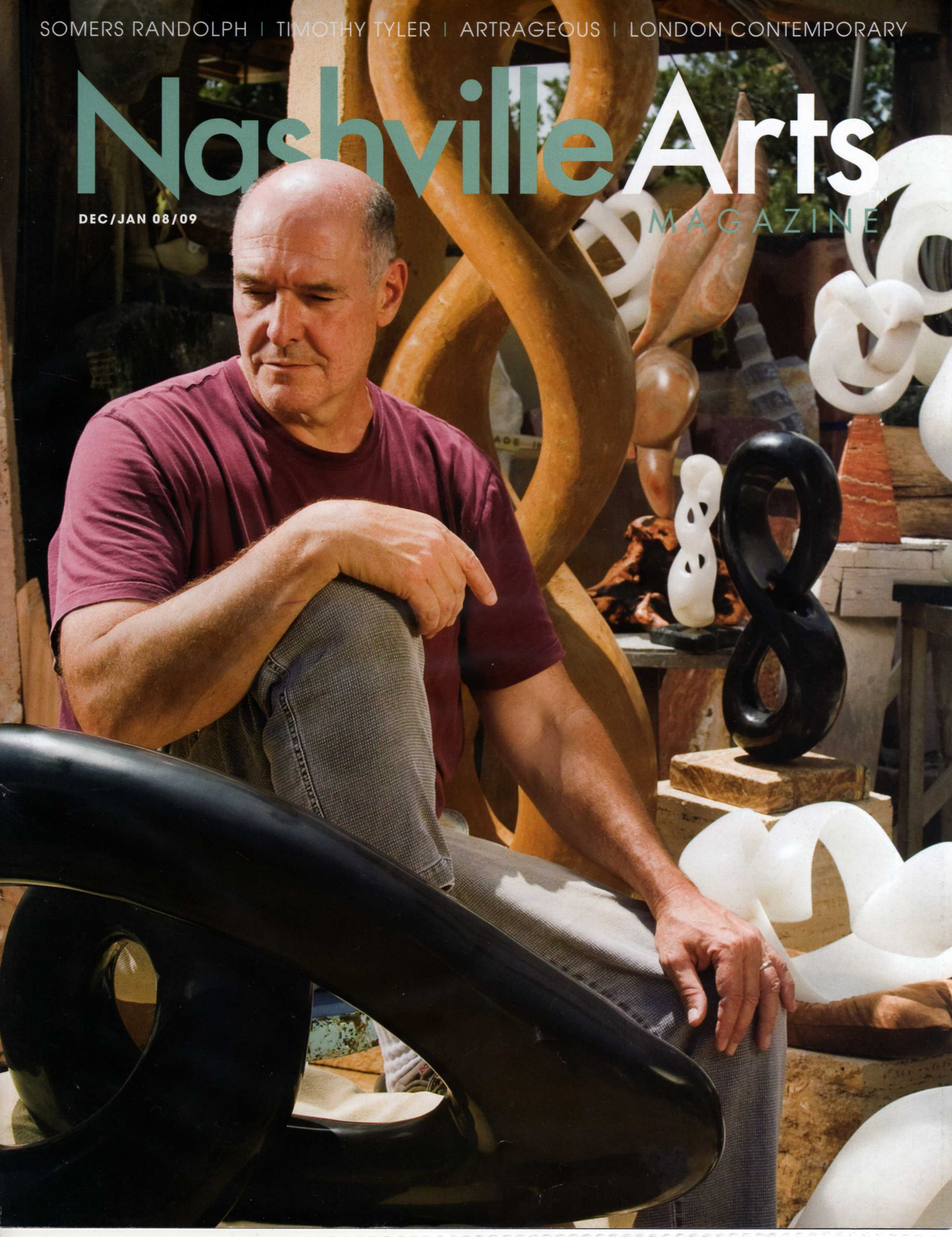


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# Nashville Arts

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# Visiting the “It” City

## for Contemporary Art

by Kami L. Rice

I arrived in London a few short weeks ago, just in time to encounter the buzz about three of the city’s significant art events, which may not be saying so much since it’s a city full of such things. If these particular events are representative, though,

I’ve entered an art scene that’s full of more contemporary art than is prevalent around Nashville. From the opening of a large new gallery to the tenth anniversary of a contemporary art festival in one of London’s boroughs to a splashy contemporary art fair, October was the perfect month for exploring London’s contemporary art culture.

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### Buzzing about contemporary art

First came the buzz about the opening of renowned collector Charles Saatchi’s new gallery in Chelsea, though admittedly I first heard more about which celebrities attended than the art that was on display. The new 70,000-square-foot space is the third incarnation of Saatchi’s gallery; he’s been buying art in London since the early 1970s. The gallery, as explained on its web site, “aims to provide an innovative forum for contemporary art, presenting work by largely unseen young artists or by established international artists whose work has been rarely or never exhibited in the UK.”

Steve Bishop is one of those young artists. He just sold two pieces to Saatchi. You might not expect it based on first glance, as Bishop doesn’t announce his artist vocation with an ultra-trendy appearance (unlike many of Nash-





OPPOSITE: Saatchi Gallery, *Chinese Offspring* by Zhang Dali. above: Saatchi Gallery, *Old Persons Home* by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu

ville's musicians), but he works in sculpture and video and uses a lot of concrete with some taxidermy added in. He says the taxidermy is more reflective of an interest in fur. He's also into using electronics, exposed electronics in particular.

The two pieces acquired by Saatchi are *Christian Dior—J'adore* (*Mountain Goat*) and *Jean-Paul Gaultier—Classique* (*Arctic Fox*), a white goat whose head is partially imbedded in a concrete sculpture and an arctic fox wrapped into a concrete sculpture resembling a woman's torso, respectively. Bishop, who is a big fan of American contemporary art and thinks there's a lot of Americanism in his work, notes that much of his work ends up being about things being objectified.

This represents the shift Julia Alvarez, curator of Bearspace Gallery and of Deptford X, explains came to the art world with post-modernity: the concept behind the art is bigger than the piece itself. For four weeks in September and October, Deptford X presented "Ghost Trade and the Spectre of Change," a program of events and exhibitions showcasing contemporary visual art that responds to different aspects of trade present throughout Deptford's layered history and to the marks and symbols these trades leave behind.

Deptford, located south of the Thames in southeast London, is the working-class neighbor of glossier and more-well-known Greenwich. "In Deptford there's a really great artists' community, a lot of artists' studios and galleries," says Alvarez. "The area's full of surprises: art exhibitions in weird church crypts to award-winning architecture tucked away in hidden places." Deptford X, celebrating its tenth year, took its audience to those places, through such presentations as art displayed through train station windows, golden balls installed around the area to reference the legacy of the pawn brokers' symbol, and an audio-walk made up of interviews, history and site-specific sounds.

#### Why London

"It's to do with the art colleges," says Alvarez in explanation of why London is such a hub for contemporary art. "London has a cutting edge about it reflected in what happened in the 60s. A lot of these movements come out of the art colleges, which become hubs of music too. It's about the art colleges being able to go before culture, be a precursor to culture, that makes it cutting edge."

Deptford's artist community has grown as graduates of local Goldsmith's College settle in Deptford, creating interaction





between the college, artists and the community. The other three primary London art colleges are St. Martin's College of Art, Chelsea School of Art, and The Slade.

In London and especially in Deptford, says Alvarez, the philosophy of the arts community emerges at a grass-roots level. She says these small grass-roots movements then grow into the more famous,


sexier events like October's Frieze Art Fair in wealthy Regent's Park, London. However, she notes that the Frieze still pushes boundaries, and "pushing boundaries is the key to birthing the next thing and the next thing and the next thing, and that's growth."

Boundary-pushing has to be nurtured rather than created, she says. And while that can happen anywhere, adversity does help nurture it. "So sometimes having a downbeat area like Deptford that never seems to get on its feet is part of the glamour."

Bishop, the young artist, notes that the contemporary art culture is specific to London more than to the UK in general. He says that Bristol where he grew up has maybe one contemporary art gallery, so there are very few opportunities to show contemporary work there, which is why he and other artists like him converge on London. "Anybody in the UK who's really serious [about creating contemporary art] moves to London, pretty much exclusively," he explains. "Everybody from home who wanted to pursue art professionally moved."

Having so many artists gathered in one city creates healthy competition, says Bishop, and keeps artists aware of art scene currents. It's this need for artists to cross paths with each other that is part of the purpose of APT, which stands for Art in Perpetuity Trust. Established in Deptford as a charity in 1995, APT "encourages participation in the visual arts through creative practice, exhibitions, and education."

Some of the 35-plus artists who now have studios at APT previously worked in studios in Greenwich, explains Liz May, studio and gallery manager at APT. But the move to Deptford has been good for them. "Deptford is very honest and true to itself. People have tried to change it, but it's still gritty



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OPPOSITE: Saatchi Gallery people viewing *Unknown Creature - Three Headed Monster* by Shen Shaomin  
ABOVE: Concrete Dreams show

and grimy.” The people of Deptford are very accepting and are supportive of artists being experimental. And artists can walk to Deptford High Street from APT and get whatever they need, which facilitates their work.

APT’s building, known as Harold Works, was built as a rag-sorting warehouse in 1911 and sits on the banks of Deptford Creek in a thoroughly industrial setting. The building allows artists “to do the work they need to do,” says May. With its large, well-lit studios and its gallery, its large sculpture yard and its space for steel workers, the building supports artists in whatever size and medium they work in.

May notes that 23 of the artists have had studios at APT since its inception, so the group is very stable, and the artists are a strong, established group who are exhibiting around London and around the world. She says that the artists are in their studios a lot, in spite of the teaching and other responsibilities many of them have, and the community that has grown up among them provides mentoring and a support network for its artists.

#### **So far so good...in spite of the economy**

Frieze Art Fair 2008 was held in the midst of the deepening gloom of the world’s financial crisis. So, although it has a reputation as the best place to see and buy the most exciting international contemporary art, sales expectations were moderate. However, the 150 participating galleries, hailing from 27 countries, reported significant individual sales and even a few sold-out stands, according to a Frieze press release.

May also referenced concerns in the art community that contemporary art may not sell as much with the financial downturn and says some galleries are scaling back. Bishop notes that new galleries were popping up every month in London’s East End prior to the financial crisis.

The news from Frieze should encourage contemporary artists, though. Frieze Art Fair co-directors Amanda Sharp and Matthew Slotover commented:

“With the financial markets in turmoil we anticipated that all the galleries would still showcase the best of international contemporary art and that the usual debate and exchange of ideas which takes place each year would continue unabated, but we were aware there was concern about sales. We are pleased, therefore, that the sales the galleries have been reporting have exceeded expectations. We have been heartened by the extent of the positive reports from the U.S., European, Latin American as well as UK galleries. Important collectors from across the globe continued to travel to the fair.”

As Alvarez, the curator, notes, most historical art forms were contemporary at some point. People wanted them because they were cutting edge. Perhaps people will find “cutting edge” more appealing than ever, as some of the historical pillars of our culture appear to crumble.

*Kami Rice (<http://www.kamirice.com>) is a Nashville-based freelance writer who has recently taken to traveling the world.*

**“ Deptford is very honest and true to itself. People have tried to change it, but it’s still gritty and grimy. ”**