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## Mauve? Gallery

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### Abstract

The Mauve? Gallery is an art gallery made unique by virtue of its location: the gallery occupies a small cubicle in a large office building in downtown Berkeley, California. Founded in March of 2009, we endeavor to curate shows of new and interesting work, and in the process make one workplace a legitimate site of creative innovation and thoughtful discourse. Each show runs for four weeks at a time, and is seen by many workers in the office building as well as various visitors who take advantage of by-appointment-only viewings to engage with the work.

Key words: Art, creativity, innovation, discourse, workplace, office

### Why?

For people who work in office environments, the workplace cubicle has become a complicated symbolic space. One wonders whether the dividing walls create privacy to be comfortably oneself while at work, or if instead the standardized, bland nature of the structures serve as reminders of one's insignificance and, possibly, replaceability. The fact of their cheapness and focus on efficiency only increases the feeling that they exist in opposition to human expression. To this end, a furniture designer in the early years of cubicles expressed his dismay upon seeing them in use:

Designer Douglas Ball, for instance, remembers the first installation of cubicles he created for a Canadian company in 1972. *"I thought I'd be excited, but I came out depressed," says Ball, now 70. "It was Dilbertville. I'd failed to visualize what it would look like when there were so many of them."*

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What we're considering, with Mauve?, then, is to re-conceive what the cubicle is. In the depressing parts of the popular imagination, these 8 x 8 foot squares confine workers like so many animals in pens. However, cramming cubicles into an open floor-plan also has the effect of immediately and drastically increasing the surface area of empty wall space. What more efficient vehicle to deliver art to unlikely audiences?

Stan Chan's exhibit is sampled here in the office-gallery. These layered works, inspired by treasures hidden and found within the walls of a childhood home, tell stories via words, objects and images.



**Figure 1. Paper Works and Relief Works by Stan Chan**



Of course, the actual art, and the audience, are the keys. Heather White, one of the workers in the office that houses Mauve, expressed some initial doubt about the project:

When I first heard about the art exhibit, I was curious and, I'll admit, a bit skeptical. I wondered how many people this would reach, about the quality of the art, if I'd remember to look at the exhibits. And why would the artist want to exhibit here anyway?

Terence Kissack, another employee, mentioned a similar concern:

It occurs to me how annoying and forced the idea of having a gallery in your workspace might be. Makes you think of staff motivation efforts developed by management ('Keep up the good work!') or pieces hanging in the lobbies of corporate headquarters hung to lend an aura of wealth and sophistication. But Mauve? feels very organic. The artists are always very accessible and put up with all kinds of very different questions. The work is taken seriously but people joke about it and offer opinions about it easily. I think everyone involved appreciates how really genuine the experience is."

In an environment characterized by anonymity, it turns out that the success of Mauve has depended not on the merits of its concept in abstract, but rather, as it should, the quality of the art and the interest of the audience. Recently, an employee who works in the building stopped by the Mauve cubicle and mentioned she had purchased one of the prints by the artist who was featured in the cubicle. She elaborated, "it's so nice when something just speaks to you, you know?"

## Expansion

At the time word about Mauve? was spreading, the floundering economy unfortunately led to suddenly empty cubicles, including the one adjacent to the original Mauve? Gallery. Slowly, individual exhibits have grown, and crept into the unused space, a gradual annexing of new territory.

Over time, the original symbolism of the gallery, of appropriating an impersonal space in the name of art, has expanded - as the artwork has come to occupy space which, when left empty, serves as a reminder of the tenuousness of employment. Now, instead, that space has become both a gathering place that generates discussion within the workplace, and for art-lovers it is an alternative to less accessible traditional gallery spaces.

Mike Craven, another worker in the building who himself has a background in art history, commented on this accessibility: "Even as someone who is interested in art, I doubt that I will get to more than two or three art shows this year, so if you count this as taking time to appreciate art, you significantly increase my art exposure." Miss White echoed those sentiments: "Honestly, being a full time employee and full time student in the East Bay, this is one of the main ways that I engage with art on a regular basis. I go to museums a few times a year, but it's nice to have such eclectic work come to us."

Mr. Kissack expands on the notion, noting not only the convenience of having the work come to you, but also the distinct experience of art outside of traditionally defined spaces:

I've always liked the idea of art outside a museum... Museums and galleries go to great lengths to create boundaries and frames within which art is shown. It's like visiting a shrine to see sacred objects. Work in the office does not have this quality.

Mr. Craven notes that the environment changes his own experience of the exhibited work: "Outside I would be either alone or with a close friend. Here my coworkers have a role in interpreting the works." By changing not only the parameters of the space of art, but also the audience itself, we can expand the creative process, with researchers and project managers offering a critical voice that, unconstrained by museum walls, offers new ways of viewing.

## Conversations

In our discussions with people who work in the building, a recurring theme has been the ability of the curated art shows to provoke conversation. People who work together have an opportunity to discuss something outside of the usual work sphere, and get to know each other as whole beings rather than just as workers. Mr. Kissack gives an example: "One of the most interesting outcomes of the curated shows are the conversations that get sparked and the questions that arise. For example, there was an exhibit of work that explored the artist's spiritual beliefs and experiences, which were exploratory and esoteric. The images initiated a number of exchanges with my colleagues about what they felt about the work and about their beliefs."

A recent exhibit that several people reference is Michael Ifland's "Economix" (Figure 2.). Ifland is an art student at UC Berkeley. His work, which coincided with the economic downturn and explored debt and economic failure at the national level as well as the local and personal levels, was particularly topical as the Mauve? Gallery is housed in a fundraising office for UC Berkeley. "Economix" played on both the artist's personal financial situation as well as that of the University, and so offered a venue for discussion in the office of issues that are sometimes difficult to discuss, or are associated with painful

measures. Instead of hearing about the University's financial situation in the context of announced budget cuts and layoffs, or thinking of our individual debt in terms of despair, the show allowed people to discuss these situations in a more thoughtful and humorous way, and ultimately, more openly. Miss White explains, "When the art is on more current events theme (I liked the finance one the most I think – especially the commentary on our relationship with credit) it sparks conversation and reflection we don't get otherwise."

The conversations are not limited to those among co-workers. Several employees mention the value of being able to meet the artists, and the artists themselves say they find the types of questions they get at Mauve? openings to be refreshing and different.

### **A sense of ownership**

Finally, people who work near the Mauve? Gallery have embraced the space and the role they play in its success. Mr. Craven notes, "It makes me feel proud to work with multifaceted individuals who have interests outside of our data gnome world." Miss White similarly describes, "we now have the reputation in the building for being the 'fun and creative' unit." Robert Calhoun, an employee in the office as well as an author and musician, notes, "The Mauve? Gallery shows me that you don't have to leave art behind at the office door. Seeing the work of other local artists displayed in a regular cubicle inspires me to write and work on my own art." The people who work in Mauve's building are anything but invisible office workers. They include choral singers, published authors, craft enthusiasts, musicians, and people involved in the local theater scene. Having a shared space to engage with and discuss new art helps make visible the people they are outside of work, and so deepens the relationships at work.

For more information on Mauve, visit: [www.mauveoffice.com](http://www.mauveoffice.com)

### **Reference**

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Figure 2. from "Economix"  
by Michael Ifland

## Tarak Shah

In addition to his duties as co-founder of Mauve?, Tarak Shah does data mining and analysis to support fundraising efforts at the University of California Berkeley. He holds bachelor's degrees in Philosophy and Mathematics from UC Berkeley, and enjoys boxing and bicycling in his spare time.



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