

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Oakland Art Murmur adds 9 venues to First Friday

[Patricia Yollin](#)

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For six years, Svea Lin Soll has owned Swarm Gallery in Oakland near Jack London Square. Now she is finally on the map.

This particular map lists the places open on the first Friday night of every month, when as many as 7,000 people turn out for an art walk organized by Oakland Art Murmur, an association of art and cultural venues that expanded southward in March to include Swarm and eight other places.

"I thought we were a good fit for Art Murmur. It's a safe, inspired and creative thing," Soll said as she watched people pour into her Second Street gallery on April 6. It was the first time the nine additional members were officially part of the Art Walk, which now stretches from 26th Street on the north to new territory in Uptown, Old Oakland, downtown and the Jack London district.

Two blocks away on Jefferson Street, the Hive was just as crowded. It includes a gallery and more than 30 artist studios. One of the liveliest belongs to John Casey, who has been involved with Art Murmur since it began in 2006.

"First Fridays have gotten so large that it's become almost a logistical issue," Casey said. "The idea of expanding Art Murmur made perfect sense because it diffuses the epicenter, at 23rd and Telegraph, and spreads people out. And we want to incorporate as much of Oakland as we can within reason."

Art Murmur has grown to 21 galleries and nine mixed-use venues, such as cafes and shops with rotating art exhibitions. For the brand-new members, the expansion means greater visibility. For the public, it provides more options in a city with one of the highest numbers of artists per capita in the country.

Given the wider geographic boundaries and the 6 to 9 p.m. time frame, it would be almost impossible for people to hit every Art Walk stop unless they traveled at intergalactic speed and spent no more than five minutes at each place. There is, however, a more rational approach.

### Target neighborhoods

Danielle Fox, director of Oakland Art Murmur and owner of Slate Contemporary Gallery on 25th Street, suggested targeting one or two neighborhoods. "I can see Jack London and Old Oakland as a good evening out, or Old Oakland and downtown/south of Grand as also fairly doable," she said, adding that the free Broadway Shuttle makes it easy to get around and that the afternoon Saturday Stroll is a less hectic alternative, especially for families.

## First-timer

On April 6, Jill Graham and her husband, who moved from Benicia to Oakland's Temescal district seven months ago, took BART from MacArthur Station to experience First Fridays for the first time.

"I'm thrilled Oakland has something that takes away from all the violence," said Graham, 54, admiring the nearby Fox Theater from the third-floor windows of Res Ipsa on 17th Street. "This is a different perspective on what Oakland has to offer."

Unlike many galleries, Res Ipsa, which was opened in December by two lawyers who are Oakland residents, will not stage a new exhibition every First Friday - though that's coincidentally what will happen May 4, when the works of painter Mitchell Johnson will be on display.

"He does representational and abstract side by side," said co-owner Jonathan Ball, who brought out a binder of Johnson's work. "He's not a rock star and he's not a starving artist."

Ball said joining Art Murmur was a "no-brainer" because "the publicity and access it provides are terrific."

Co-owner Frank Petrilli said, "It's bringing folks into town. The idea is to elevate what Oakland is doing culturally."

Res Ipsa's white walls, narrow space and minimalist sensibility were a counterpoint to Betti Ono Gallery a block away on Telegraph Avenue. Even though it was only 6:30 p.m., people were spilling onto the sidewalk. Wine was flowing, a disc jockey had just put on "Love the Way It Should Be" and sunlight drenched a bright red wall.

"We would have been crazy not to be a part of Art Murmur," said owner Anyka Barber, who opened her gallery in September. "It's an awesome opportunity to show how Oakland is a destination."

The crowd was as wildly diverse as Oakland itself. "One family with a baby stayed here three hours," Barber recalled.

Phillip Mehas, who is on the Richmond Arts Commission, was taking it all in. He's a First Friday veteran and had brought his girlfriend, who lives in Sonoma.

"I like to support emerging young artists, especially artists of color," said the white-haired Richmond resident. "It's always fun and entertaining, and you get good art."

At 10 p.m., John Casey was still chitchatting with visitors to his studio, which featured graphite and pen-and-ink drawings in a style he described as "surreal realism," with characters whose bodies morph into their emotions or state of mind.

"Normally we're a pretty private little enclave here," said Casey, whose studio is usually open only two weeks in June. "Now we're much more public. People can see us where we work, under the veneer, and ask questions. Not everyone is comfortable with that, but they should be. I'm more than happy to discuss my work."

**Oakland Art Murmur:** The next First Friday Art Walk takes place from 6 to 9 p.m. Fri. For details, a map and parking and transit information, go to [oaklandartmurmur.org](http://oaklandartmurmur.org).

Patricia Yollin is a freelance writer. [sadolphson@sfchronicle.com](mailto:sadolphson@sfchronicle.com)



Visitors check out pieces at the Chandra Cerrito Contemporary Gallery.  
Families are among the diverse visitors taking advantage of the art walks.  
Photo: Jill Schneider / The Chronicle