



ARTSY



A trippy digital art gallery is opening in Georgetown

Sadie Dingfelder // 25 APR 19

Georgetown is a tiny Washington, D.C., neighborhood that sits next to the Potomac River. It is home to the namesake university, some of the city's nicest townhouses, and see-and-be-seen spots popular with the current White House administration. The boîte Cafe Milano is familiar to *Politico Playbook* subscribers, as the newsletter often includes gossip tidbits regaling readers about how, say, Ivanka Trump blocked Nobel Peace Prize nominee José Andrés from entering a party at Cafe Milano because the beloved restaurateur criticized her father for calling Mexicans rapists. Sometimes, the newsletter notes that a senator from oil-rich Texas just happened to be there at the same time as the ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. Often, the *Politico Playbook* mention is as simple as "SPOTTED: Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin at Cafe Milano last night."

Also in Georgetown, there's a tiny slip of a street called Cady's Alley, which in the first days of April

welcomed a completely different kind of local establishment: Von Ammon Co, a contemporary art space started by Todd von Ammon, a former director at the influential New York outfit Team Gallery in SoHo.

The neighborhood's newest business is a surprise, to say the least.

"It's a gamble, especially in a city known for being culturally conservative," wrote a reporter for the *Washington Post*. The developer behind much of Cady's Alley told local blog *DCist* that Von Ammon needed to "choose an artist who wasn't so edgy or expensive that it missed the mark for his debut showing."

And yet, to hear Von Ammon, who is 32, talk about this city, his enthusiasm is contagious, in a way that made me, a D.C. native, cast off my decades-old notions about this government town: that it could have national institutions but not nationally important galleries; that it could have museums to house works by American artists but not the market apparatus to build American artists up.

I was speaking with Von Ammon last Saturday, just two weeks after the opening of the space, at a makeshift front desk in the space. The sun was streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows, and curious passersby occasionally peered in. Von Ammon and I had first chatted about his decision to open in D.C. a month earlier, and I shared my reservations then. He admitted at the time that he, too, had some concerns. But now that he's taken the plunge, he's confident it will work—the District of Columbia, he said, just needed someone to come and take it seriously as a city of potential collectors.

"It's another one of those self-fulfilling prophecies," he said on Saturday. "You know: 'They don't care about us, so we don't collect.' Why *would* anybody collect here, you know?"

Just then, a young couple carrying bags from Dean & DeLuca (another wonderful SoHo-to-D.C. transplant) walked in, glanced around, and asked, "Is this an art gallery?" They seemed to be taken aback by the mic drop of a first show, "MENTAL," a bombastic selection of new work by Tabor Robak.

The 32-year-old artist makes gleeful and potentially seizure-inducing multimedia installations that wow on first glance (and, yes, on Instagram) but then dig deep into your membrane. They address heavy subjects like late capitalism, but abound with ads, gifs, memes, jokes, billboards, anime, animations, and screaming neon, pulsating like living electronic organisms. Robak's work has unimpeachable bonafides that make Von Ammon Co, upon inception, the most immediately vital commercial gallery space in the nation's capital. A work of Robak's is up now at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), in the instantly canonical show "New Order: Art and Technology in the 21st Century," which the *New Yorker* proclaimed "plants a flag for the future."

The attention-grabbing debut, Von Ammon said, was very much deliberate.

"This is all in, and D.C. needs somebody to go *all in*," Von Ammon said. "And that's my plan."

It should be stated that, despite the scarcity of art dealers, D.C. has long been a world-class city for arts *institutions*, starting with the founding of the Corcoran as one of the country's first fine art museums. In the

1920s, the collector Duncan Phillips invited Washingtonians in to see his adventurous collection of art, primarily from Europe, thereby opening the country's first modern art museum. In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson convinced Joseph Hirshhorn to donate his collection of post-war art and works by living artists to the Smithsonian—there, on the National Mall, would be a contemporary art museum to complement MoMA in New York.

As it stands, though, there's no local gallery scene featuring primary market output of artists who show in major galleries globally and are chosen for important biennales. Perhaps the only D.C. gallery with a consistent presence on the international fair circuit is Connersmith, which is located near Logan Circle in Shaw, a neighborhood in the city's Northeast quadrant. But Von Ammon found that, during trips down to see his parents, who moved to Washington six years ago, the lack of a circuit could be something of a blessing, as he was becoming a little disenchanted with the U.S. market's biggest arena.

"I think a lot of people do think that being in New York is important, but I found the competition to be a little suffocating," he said. "The art world shouldn't be a zero-sum game, and at times it feels that way in New York. That's what I found exhausting. It did feel like a zero-sum game. Like: '*I'm* the one who got Chrissie Iles to the show—and that means *you* didn't.' Or: '*I* got the Roberta Smith review—And *you* didn't.'"

He also saw how D.C.'s institutions have begun to embrace the art market power structures in New York and abroad, making a cutting-edge gallery's presence in the city more viable. It began when the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden hired Melissa Chiu, a New Yorker who had been running Asia Society, and she brought on Gianni Jetzer, the curator of the Unlimited sector at Art Basel in Basel, as her curator-at-large—a bridge to the market right there. Jetzer would be based in New York, a quick shot up the Acela corridor. The museum even had its 40th anniversary gala in New York, at the World Trade Center, and who was the person listed as the gala's lead supporter? Larry Gagosian, who has four galleries and a bookstore in Manhattan.

Some locals didn't like the push toward New York and its power structures. "It is a snub, and a distressing indication that she doesn't understand the purpose, the history, or the identity of the museum she now leads," wrote Philip Kennicott, the long-serving *Washington Post* art critic. But the moves injected much-needed juice into the Hirshhorn's programming and made it possible for young dealers to have an audience with curators who could place their artists in the only contemporary art museum on the National Mall. Jetzer told me that he got dinner with Von Ammon soon after he moved down, and is very excited about what the young dealer is planning.

And in 2018, the D.C. area got its Marfa-level art mecca when the Glenstone museum in Potomac, Maryland, opened its expanded and built-out \$200-million compound, allowing the public to see works from the collection of billionaire mega-collectors Emily and Mitchell Rales, who have significant holdings of work by Cy Twombly, Charles Ray, and Ellsworth Kelly, as well as major large-scale works by Robert Gober, Jeff Koons, and Michael Heizer. "With the expansion of Glenstone, it started to make D.C. seem like a real destination again," Von Ammon said. He realized something was happening in D.C., but the scene was still small enough that he could, as he put it, "take more risks."

He added: “For my purposes, I had absolutely no competition whatsoever. There was no one else vying for my territory at all. And that’s what I wanted—pure curatorial freedom.”

He found the space on Cady’s Alley and snapped it up quickly, realizing it was bigger than what he was working with at Team, and much bigger than his New York project space—also called Von Ammon Co, it was just a section of his former high-rise apartment in the swirly Frank Gehry skyscraper in downtown Manhattan. (Von Ammon Co also specializes in private art consultancy, per its website.) In fact, the big Cady’s Alley gallery was the perfect kind of space for a Robak show, as his large installations incorporate monitors and LED screens and flashing lights to achieve a J.G. Ballard-meets-iPhone-addiction frenzy. An art show about late capitalism is no doubt poignant in Georgetown, a 10-minute Uber ride away from the Federal Reserve. But it also makes sense to show such work near a museum like the Hirshhorn, which is acquiring similarly time-based works by artists such as Ed Atkins, Arthur Jafa, and Jesper Just.

“I’ve worked with Tabor since he started showing in galleries,” Von Ammon said. “I thought it made sense to show somebody who was young, who was engaging, and whose work I can safely say I’m an expert with.” It’s the start of a programming schedule that will have room for four shows a year, usually solo or two-person exhibitions—the relatively slow pace accounts for those who only make the three-hour Acela ride down from New York a few times a year. (Holidays, Von Ammon noted, make for busy weekends, and several Big Apple-based dealers stopped by last weekend during Easter and Passover.)

Von Ammon is greatly admired for his curatorial eye: He’s organized shows at Team but also at Dublin’s Ellis King and San Francisco’s Berggruen Gallery. East Hampton’s Halsey McKay has a show up through April 30th that Von Ammon organized, with work by Robak as well as Ajay Kurian, Megan Marrin, Ashley Bickerton, and others. Next week, a show he organized opens at Marlborough Contemporary’s Manhattan project space. He noted that, so far, he’s been making sales to clients in New York, as he’s able to convey the power of Robak’s work through images and videos—the collectors don’t need to be present to close the deal, he said. Asked how sales are going, he said, dryly, “so far it’s been just as difficult here as it would be in New York”—but added that he was pleasantly surprised the business had been about the same since his move to D.C.

His goal is to also sell to local collectors, some of whom may have never bought art before. He wants to get Washingtonians unfamiliar with the artists he’s showing in the door, regardless of whether or not they understand the art historical context inherent in the work.

“You definitely get the feeling that you’re giving some people their first visit to an art gallery, which is kind of an amazing feeling,” he said.

It remains to be seen whether other dealers will escape from New York’s small spaces with big rents and head down I-95 to a city that’s still just dipping its toe into the international art market. But from talking to Von Ammon, and to other art world figures with ties to the Beltway, the move has certainly raised eyebrows.

“I got a bunch of emails from gallerists who said ‘I’ve been thinking about doing this *forever*,’” Von Ammon

said. “And this is definitely a vote in favor of me at least trying something out.”

For what it’s worth, I told him that after seeing the response to his gallery, and experiencing the impact of the Hirshhorn and Glenstone, it was the first time that I could actually imagine a circuit of galleries in D.C. selling new work by artists who show at the world’s prestigious biennales. Perhaps it wasn’t just Von Ammon’s enthusiasm, but also the realization that Washington, D.C., has 2,735 ultra-high-net-worth individuals—people who are defined as having assets in excess of \$30 million—placing it fifth in the nation as of 2018, behind New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco. All of those cities have gallery communities and annual art fairs—so why not Washington? I could see there being a great art fair in D.C.—perhaps near Eastern Market, the hip food hall located in a series of warehouses. Despite the city’s cultural conservatism and current lack of a gallery scene, it will always be deeply international. And with the constant change in political administrations, many families often find themselves moving into homes with bare walls. It just takes dealers to come and sell them the things to install there.

“I’m literally begging my friends to just give it a shot because the growth will be exponential,” he said. “If just one other person who is doing what I do opened up in D.C., it would change things immediately.”

Tabor Robak’s ‘MENTAL’ at von ammon co., Washington, DC. runs until November 02 2019