

# How Low Will Artists Stoop?

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

Crouching inside Skeith DeWine's art gallery in Santa Ana is a lot like falling down Alice's rabbit hole. Reality is warped. You're a giant in a tiny box.

Located under a stairwell that leads to the basement of the Santora Arts Complex, the gallery was a utility room filled with trash, mice and wasps. Enter owner and local portrait painter DeWine, who revamped the space he has named "The Smallest Art Gallery in California."

"People [want] new ways to look at art--on computers, on the streets, buses and big audacious galleries and museums that are like giant cathedrals where the art gets lost," said DeWine, a 32-year-old Santa Ana resident who tends bar by day.

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He's not sure it's the smallest anywhere, but it certainly is Guinness-book tiny. His rent is only \$20 a month.

DeWine knows most artists can relate to his desire to display art on a shoestring budget and in a microscopic space. He holds shows quarterly and is open on Saturdays and by appointment.

As he talks, the sound of heavy footsteps pound above. The artful den feels like the inside of a child's secret playhouse. Rawness is part of its charm.

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Three spotlights hang from a sprinkler pipe that cuts across the 4 1/2-foot ceiling. The 8 1/2-by-7-foot floor is only 59 1/2 square feet. Its cream-colored carpet is clean with little sign of wear. Foot traffic is at a minimum because only two visitors can comfortably fit inside.

The unconventional space in the busy urban setting at 2nd Street and Broadway in downtown Santa Ana gives context to past exhibits like "Allison Through the Looking Glass," a show about youth and drug addiction that was a takeoff on Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland."

The current show, "Circle Citadel," took less than an hour to hang, said featured artist Daniel Kaufman.

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“I’ve never been in a space that small before,” said Kaufman, 32, who is just under 6 feet tall. “I was on my knees hanging up the show and hit my head a couple of times on the sprinkler system.”

Kaufman, a 1991 Cal State Fullerton graduate who lives in Banning, has exhibited at conventional galleries, such as the now-defunct Caged Cameleon in Santa Ana and Artscape Gallery in Long Beach. During the day, the commercial artist paints 10-foot billboards of celebrities and entertainers at Tower Records in Long Beach.

He has downsized his canvases for this show.

Visitors must bow to enter the gallery one at a time. “I like that the space puts the viewer in a certain position--either slightly stooping or kneeling and slightly uncomfortable--to see the art,” Kaufman said. “The viewer just can’t walk by the art in this gallery. They have to put in a little extra effort to see the show.”

But the intimate surroundings also put a damper on those white wine and meet-the-artist receptions.

“There’s not a whole lot of pretense with this gallery,” Kaufman said. “You can’t really make the social scene in here like most people do at galleries.”

The “Smallest Art Gallery in California” offers a one-to-one interaction with the art being viewed, they said. Even the smallest piece won’t be lost.

“Most people can’t fathom that this 4-foot door is actually an art gallery,” DeWine said. “But it’s a humble temple to art.”

“Circle Citadel,” The Smallest Art Gallery in California, 207 N. Broadway, Santa Ana. Through Jan. 4. Free. Open Saturdays, noon-4 p.m., and by appointment. (714) 564-0836.