

DIVERSITY Conversations: Commonwealth and Council
Cobi Krieger Interviews Director Kibum Kim

Commonwealth and Council is a contemporary art gallery based in LA. Now celebrating its 10-year anniversary, the gallery has been praised for its diverse program and roster of artists. It recently launched the Council Fund, a tool allowing patrons to donate the amount of their discounts on purchased art. The Council Fund will be distributed periodically, in accordance with gallery artists' votes.

Director Kibum Kim and I discussed the Commonwealth and Council's historic connection to diversity and minority voices, and how the Council Fund plays into a greater ambition to reshape the arts ecosystem and empower artists within it.

Cobi Krieger

Let's begin by discussing diversity at Commonwealth and Council (C&C), among your team members, artist roster, and in the gallery in general – How instrumental or how valuable do you think diversity is for the gallery?

Kibum Kim

Oh god... I think this is a bit of a double-edged question, at least for us it is.

The history of the space and how it came to be 10 years ago - it was an artist-run project space run from Young [Chung]'s apartment. From the beginning, the emphasis [on diversity] was always there. The vision was always there for [the gallery] to reflect the community that [Young] and a few of the people were involved with at the time and wanted to champion. Gala [Porras-Kim] was the first artist who showed and was very instrumental; and she in many ways was like the driver who kept on pushing for the growth of the gallery to what it is now, instead of it staying in a project space or being kind of Young's own thing.

With that, Young and Gala speak about how they've always been fans of female artists. That was definitely an explicit thing that was important about the program and commonwealth being a platform for something. That kind of desire for diversity was there from the beginning.

I should also add that Young's artistic sensibilities began to develop in the early-mid 90s when he was in undergrad at UC Irvine. He initially intended to major in philosophy, but discovered art. At the time, Catherine Lord had just taken over the program. Catherine really revamped the art program, pushed for more radical art that addressed identity politics similarly to the era of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Catherine not only championed this kind of art, but created opportunities for the artists partaking in this type of discourse to hold coveted tenure jobs. Young Soon Min, a pioneering Korean-American female artist, a mentor and still a good friend of Young's, was one faculty member for example. Catherine Opie was a teacher who encouraged Young to become an artist.

That kind of artwork – that has a bit of political and social bite – is something that I think was just very formative for how Young looks at art and what art he loves. This background naturally developed into the gallery programming. Looking back now 10 years into C&C's activity and its community of artists, we represent artists who are exploring similar issues and using art as a vehicle to ask these social questions. All that goes to say, that as far as programming goes, the foundation to create a program that would be anchored in diversity and champion voices from minorities was always there, without it being a deliberate directive.

And how does that content bleed out into who actually works at the gallery? I think our staff and partners are a natural extension of this deeper approach. Many of the people who end up working with us come to us saying they love what C&C is doing and would love to be a part of it. So, there's definitely like a self-selecting process. For better or worse, usually someone who's cut their teeth at a big, resourced gallery or at an auction house is not likely to aspire to work with us. People know, as they do with any other kind of emerging gallery, that this is kind of like an intrepid environment, both exciting and challenging. Young and I can call ourselves partners or owners, and we do all the ostensibly glamorous things in the art world like going to art fairs and museum openings, but we also have to mop the floors and wash the dishes. And I believe this experience is shared by many small galleries, their staff is probably similar in size to ours, three or four core people and a lot of part-time folks.

CK

So, the diversity is kind of the gallery's DNA, it stems from a fundamental approach of the founder Young and his history.

From my perspective, I see C&C's diversity reflected not only in its people and their perspectives that form the program, but also in the topics that these people go on to pursue through their respective mediums. I think this is a distinction that's important to make, because it's not only about championing minority voices, but also about promoting voices that want to discuss relevant issues.

KK

We're very cognizant of why we get attention. It feels like everything came together at the right time – a group of our emerging artists began to gain notice at the same time when the larger art world was really hungry for diversity. And our program represents that; those who run the gallery represent that. I get it and we're proud of it. But we remain aware of the fact that we are not perfect and that we have blind spots too. We're open to making mistakes and trying to fix and do better on certain elements. If you really unpack it, there is a reason that someone like me who happens to be another cis male Korean American Queer person happened to become partners with Young. And our life experiences are very much brought into how we run the gallery, interact with the artists, engage with the art that we show.

We do probably have an easier time understanding certain issues that are addressed by the art that our artists make or the feelings and contexts and situations that relate to it. However, we don't know what it's like to be a Black person in America; we don't know what it's like to be a

woman. We are both able-bodied. That is a particular blind spot we're becoming more aware of and thinking about how we could best address within the constraints that we have. I just downloaded Katrina Sullivan's report about the role of artists in creating access in the arts; I'm super excited to read it.

I think that realization about blind spots and limitations is probably the biggest takeaway about truly trying to represent and do justice in terms of diversity. There is a performative marketing-oriented way in which diversity is getting thrown around these days. And I don't mean to dismiss that, but our big lesson in supposedly embodying diversity and representing artists who embody diversity, is that it truly is intersectional. All of us occupy certain vectors of privilege and all of us have certain blind spots.

CK

And at the same time, we all embody certain disadvantages and sensibilities that in turn put us in the right place to increase representation of our marginalized communities.

Something that I believe sets C&C apart from the performative tokenizing examples of diverse gallery programming is its collective synergy. That type of program can only happen when you factor in a statement like you made. No one individual could accomplish your program, in terms of its quality and breadth. It is about doing something together.

KK

With the recognition and growth that we have been very lucky to experience in the past few years, we're also trying to be aware of and tackle the dynamics that are changing. We still feel like a very small gallery that's living hand to mouth and always hustling, but we're not underdogs at Young's apartment anymore. We do have certain kinds of power, social and cultural capital. So, the standards by which we should be looking at and thinking about these issues evolves with that. Returning to accessibility, we are in a second-floor space of an old building that isn't accessible to people who have walking issues. And it's quickly becoming untenable: the proverbial 'mom and pop shop' leave them alone excuse won't hold water for much longer. We try to be aware of how we can continue to represent and promote and grow the values that this community was founded upon. And 2020 has further contextualized that the capitalist demand for constant growth is not the end goal. We do want to grow, and hopefully we will, but that's not the primary goal that drives our decision-making.

CK

There's also an emphasis on the process and how that growth will occur.

KK

That's the kind of growth that we're most excited about. And that's where the Council Fund, the Commonwealth Trust, and our summer school came from.

CK

These initiatives are examples of commitment and deep embodiment of the values you were mentioning.

It's one thing to have more shows that include BIPOC or other-abled artists. Creating space to discuss diversity and related topics is also important. But ultimately, the systems and the powers that create certain habits are the ones that result in a certain type of pressure that drives galleries to shape their programs. For example, the market and its trends drive what a gallery will feature in its program, even more so when it's a small gallery with limited financial resources. So, shaking up these systems, trying to rethink them and create alternatives has huge potential to create new working models driven by different powers.

The Council Fund, which I'd like to discuss in further detail, is an exemplary alternative. While you were inspired by similar ventures, as far as I know, no other gallery has ever made such a proposition to their patrons, while making it a public formalized tool. Basically, Commonwealth and Council asks patrons to donate the amount of their typical 10 percent discount to a fund that the gallery holds. The fund is distributed periodically at the discretion of the gallery artists through a voting process.

The typical 10 percent discount has become an arbitrary way for galleries to give patrons and collectors a sense of status and affirmation. Over time, since most galleries offer it and most collectors receive it, the discount lost some of this original significance. The Fund is a way to operationalize an exchange in value – to take that self-affirming discount and translate it into financial freedom and agency for to the gallery and its artists. Building a financial tool that draws that equation, that can make patrons not only see this trade off, but also opt for the latter option, is very innovative and in the context of diversity it's pretty profound.

Does that resonate with you? How do you see it? And what do you hope the Fund will allow you to do?

KK

That was really beautiful, thank you. And yes, I like that, it is kind of the thrust behind it all.

At this point, I think I'm speaking more for myself; prior to this year, I was very committed to this system of values and community that Young has created with the artists, and to my role within it, to spread and amplify that message and grow a sustainable business and market demand for the artist so that they can make work and not have to always have side jobs and such. So, I have valued growth in terms of numbers, the traditional markers of prestige and success like fairs and biennials. And not to say that we denounce all that, but this year I really shifted my own thinking. I'm now thinking that what would be most amazing is if we could reconsider and thwart the way things are done in the art world.

I can do what every other gallery is able to do – identify certain dynamics forming around an artist's career, capitalize on that and create a healthy market for the artist. Frankly, when all of

those pieces fit together, the work kind of sells itself. What I'm personally most excited about now is engaging people in conversations so they look at artists who might not have all the tailwind in the world. Get people excited even without the rest of the art world's social winds, which typically dictate an artist's market and demand. And Young has also thought about it this way, and we've tried to articulate and push this idea.

The Council Fund is part of shifting the conversations with our patrons from an exchange of artwork and money to a way of providing real patronage – a sustained relationship, a friendship with these artists and what they stand for, and by extension the gallery of Commonwealth and Council as a whole. What can that type of patronage mean? Patrons know they give up control over the money when they give up the discount. When they contribute it to the Council Fund, they can't earmark it for a certain expense. Giving to the Fund means they give that agency and control to the artists.

CK

Which is a very nice step away from traditional philanthropy practices...

KK

Yes, and it's also a leap of faith, it's trust. We don't discount that at all, we appreciate it so much. Which is why we wanted to publicly acknowledge these patrons. The Fund is part of our vision of the kind of art world and market we're most excited by and want to be a part of.

CK

Considering the recognition Commonwealth and Council has been enjoying, and the social capital that comes with it, it's exciting that you're actually able to do the things the way you want to do them, and not just speak about it. You can actually counter certain market forces and existing structures, be radical, innovative, and creative.

KK

The debuting of the Council Fund and these ideas might be just the beginning of our posing these questions. And maybe some other folks will come up with much better ideas, and that will be great. We definitely consider this an experiment, and experimenting is part of what we find gratifying.

CK

The word experiment is very important, I think.

I recently discussed this with a colleague of mine, Tatiana Vahan, founder of The Los Angeles Artists Census. Traditional experiments in science don't typically define outcomes as successes

or failures. An experiment starts, things happen, you observe, draw conclusions, learn what you can. Failing isn't really part of that process. I've been trying to apply that approach to working in the arts and share it when others mention experimentation.

KK

Totally. You know, the entire art world and how it works is all made up. Returning to the discounts: What percentage is high and what is not? What's the institutional discount? We made all that up. Placements, like a promise given to a museum, the right of first refusal – all artificial.

CK

I was curious to hear more about how the Council Fund was received. What was the first discussion with your patrons?

KK

Young was the one who made the first ask. It was our patron and colleague Ann Soh Woods; she was very excited and wholeheartedly supported the idea. And for the most part that's been the response. Even when folks decline, they've mostly said they could use the discount now but would like to support in the future. Thus far we haven't had any negative responses. However, I will say it probably is something that has been so easy because we're familiar with our audience and have pretty close relationships with our best collectors. And they all know how much of a communal enterprise the gallery is. With new collectors and their advisors, I do ask myself, "Should I even bring this up right now?" Because without the relationship, you're just another shop or business. So as of now, we are mindful of the right moments and with whom to bring up the topic.

The discussions have mostly revolved around practicalities. Questions like, "How are you spending the money? Is the Fund a 501(c)3? How are the artists going to choose what projects to support?" Thus far, the spirit of the Fund has been unanimously well received.

CK

Would you consider making it mandatory for all future acquisitions?

KK

We're open to anything. No discounts at Commonwealth and Council, period. Honestly, I think collectors might be okay with that, but I'm not sure about museums, who really like their twenty percent. Some museums might think of us as a for-profit business and see themselves as the non-profit do-gooders.

CK

Depends on the museum, I would say...

What have the discussions about the Fund among the gallery artists been like?

KK

Artists obviously have been very enthusiastic. We are thinking about benefits for artists, given the fact that so many are freelance workers and they don't necessarily have full-time work positions that come with benefits. This has led us to discuss artist unions or guilds. We may not have the capacity to lead this cause, but now we have the means to plug into these efforts.

CK

Have there been any discussions about less sellable, more conceptual projects that the gallery artists could now afford?

KK

At this point, the Commonwealth and Council Summer School is probably at the top of that list. There is a long history of artists founding experimental schools but actually quite a few different threads of artists in our program that brought this up. Most recently, when COVID hit, artists wanted to connect with other artists. But the school has also been an opportunity to rethink the arts education system, which really has become more and more of a system for tracking in that kind of neoliberal ideology of growth and professionalism. Also, the economics of it are so messed up. In order to get any kind of legibility in the art world, an artist has to get an MFA, hopefully at a very prestigious program. Artists often graduate with huge amounts of debt and aren't likely to make a steady income. The high cost of education can sometimes create an expectation to be picked up by a gallery, even if it's a subconscious one. Beginning artists often show work that seems very market-ready, which may not necessarily be the most important exciting work they can make, but it can bring them closer to these predetermined markers of success.

With that in mind, a bunch of the artists really wanted to start a school and the big dream is for it to become an independent entity, which we'll be very excited to support through the Council Fund.