

CULTURAL

Commonwealth and Council has become one of the world's most well-regarded contemporary art galleries by creating a business model based exclusively on cultural currency.

CAPITAL

BY ALLISON BERG PORTRAIT BY RUBEN DIAZ



Commonwealth and Council's founding artists Young Joon Kwak (front left, in black bustier), EJ Hill and Gala Porras-Kim (to the immediate right of Kwak), Danielle Dean (center, in patterned jacket) and Jennifer Moon (front right) champion practices by women, queer, POC and ally artists to build counter-histories that reflect their community.



An installation view of Hill's "The Necessary Reconditioning of the Highly Deserving," 2017, at the gallery's current location, during which viewers were invited to use the swing to underscore the exhibition's theme of the importance of representing marginalized bodies in places of elevation.

PHOTO BY RUBEN DIAZ

PHOTO BY GALA PORRAS-KIM

WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTERED THE Commonwealth and Council building, I was confused by the sign above the dilapidated Koreatown door: "Alcohólicos Anónimos." A curator friend had suggested there might be a professional synchronicity between co-owner Kibum Kim and myself, two recovered attorneys with a passion for art. I double-checked; I had the correct address. Had I gotten sloppy at a recent exhibition opening?

I soon learned the gallery is indeed located within Los Angeles's oldest Spanish-speaking A.A. meeting building. The atypical environs were a fitting preview to the alternative art gallery model I was about to discover. At Commonwealth and Council, art is not necessarily synonymous with beauty, and success isn't measured by opulence. I had inadvertently stumbled upon a creative haven where the artists represent the space, instead of the usual gallery approach of the space representing the artists. After a brief journey up a steep stairwell and down a decaying hallway, I became immersed in Commonwealth and Council's conceptually challenging commitment to artists' visions and minority voices.

Co-owner Young Chung (formerly a practicing artist) and artist Gala Porras-Kim launched Commonwealth and Council as a residency in Chung's apartment in 2010. Having just returned from a nine-week intensive workshop at the Skowhegan School of Painting

and Sculpture, Porras-Kim was trading her artwork in exchange for a room with Chung. Their landlord abruptly kicked them out following their first few boisterous openings, but having made a pact to complete at least five solo exhibitions together, they quickly pivoted into their current space, adding five more artists to the roster: EJ Hill, Danielle Dean, Alice Könitz, Young Joon Kwak and Jennifer Moon.

Six years into the collaboration, attorney and professor Kibum Kim joined as a partner, and, more recently, Director Irina Gusin and Coordinator Audrey Min came on board to support the flourishing program. To this day, all the O.G. artists remain; Chung acts as the lead conceptualist and Kim as the problem solver, embracing specific roles and titles, but avoiding overusing them. "We are all like space operators," purports Kim. "Young and I are the decision makers, but we also mop the floors." Each of their email addresses begin with "we," "ours," "us" or "together" instead of their individual names.

Primarily interested in the voices of women, POC and queer artists, Commonwealth and Council has become a favorite communal art space for the world's most well-respected curators. Their spirit of generosity is palpable, and the cultural conversations extend well beyond the artists with whom they work. The gallery now has 26 artists bound together by their unique abilities to imagine what can be considered "art" and to advance impactful perspectives.

"The measure of our success is in cultural capital. It's not about owning something that other people covet; it's the idea that a statement can be an emotional investment and a contribution to the human endeavor."

-Kibum Kim

The business model, if you will, is to cultivate relationships with curators, institutions, and collectors who are closely affiliated with museums. "The institutional attention comes first, and then the market follows," proffers Chung. As their artists' markets have grown, the space has started to loosely resemble a more traditional, commercial gallery. Nonetheless, its values continue to be shaped by what these artists want and need. Commonwealth and Council is a collaborative where each and every artist in the program has respect for one another, as artists and as humans. They are all excited to be part of a greater context, with many engaged in political activism that is not necessarily tied to their work. "Most of these artists could easily be showing with much bigger galleries, but they know, particularly for the long term, that context is important," explains Chung.

Though the gallery's intended purpose was never to sell art, the founders obtained a business license in 2014 when a private collector purchased something for a museum and needed to include sales tax. Commonwealth and Council remains a non-profit, with the partners forgoing salaries and Kim teaching full-time to keep the doors open. Chung and Kim fancy themselves as being invested in ideas rather than material objects. They emphasize that they are not "anti-market," but do place most of their energy toward courting museum board members and arts patrons, who get to know the artists and support their projects without necessarily owning the artwork. "The measure of our success is not when everything is sold out with a waitlist for the next show," proclaims Chung.

This purist platform is getting them into top art fairs, which, for better or worse, are big validators for contemporary art galleries. "It is kind of comical," muses Kim. "When we got into Basel, so many people congratulated us." They both laugh. Unlike most galleries, they aren't in a race to the fairs' inner sphincters. In fact, fairs look to Commonwealth's curatorial programming to legitimize their solo sections. This past summer at Art Basel, for instance, EJ Hill staged a conceptual follow-up to his Hammer Museum *Made in L.A.* project. Having grown up in South Los Angeles and then spending a year doing a fellowship at Cambridge's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, he produced an alternative vision of a more inclusive educational institution as a tribute to Tamir Rice, the 12-year-old African American boy shot to death by a Cleveland police officer. Hill donated a portion of his sales from Art Basel to the Ohio-based Tamir Rice Foundation, which is establishing an arts education program for local, mostly African American children.

Chung and Kim concur that although art has become a 60-billion-dollar industry with all the glamour and luxury that comes with that kind of cash, it is a social responsibility to take care of art and shepherd institutional opportunities for their artists. That is their priority. The current museum-funding model depends on galleries and their clients for acquisitions. Managing that aspect of their artists' practices—raising funds for shows, finding patrons and collectors to graciously acquire works as gifts to museums or underwrite exhibitions—has become its own full-time job. The

duo find it similarly important to create varied prospects for their artists beyond the gallery walls. They dream about possibilities such as a Commonwealth and Council artists-led alternative art school, inspired by Hill's hypothesis of what a classroom should be and performance artist Rafa Esparza's collaborative projects gathering brown and queer cultural producers outside traditional art spaces.

Right now, they are also trying to be present and revel in their artists' accomplishments. "When Young and I were in New York for Gala's Whitney Biennial opening, I was like, 'Did you think we would ever be here together?'" reminisces Kim. While many big goals have come to fruition since the days in Chung's living room almost a decade ago, the partners say nothing ever feels like a culmination. "Each achievement feels like another beginning—there's always so much more to do," asserts Kim. "The measure of our success is in cultural capital. It's not about owning something that other people covet; it's the idea that a statement can be an emotional investment and a contribution to the human endeavor."



A detail from Porras-Kim's first exhibition held in Young's living room in 2010, "I Want to Prepare to Learn Something I Don't Know," an artistic mapping of the surrounding Koreatown neighborhood that explored relations between meaning, translations and cultural consumption.