

thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Zornitsa Stoyanova

"In the end it comes down to community" - Gus Gscheidle and his 1fiftyone gallery + art space

by Zornitsa Stoyanova

[1fiftyone gallery + art space](#) is raw. Situated on the fourth and fifth floor of an Old City building, it is a new home for the experimental—dance, theater, music and performance. Gus Gscheidle, a visual artist, graphic designer, and lover of dance and performance, runs it. I met Gus six years ago through our mutual friend choreographer Annie Wilson.

One gloomy January morning, I climbed the creaking stairs to the fourth floor to talk to him about his passions, commitment to Philly underground performance, and hopes for the future.

I've always known... that I wanted to do something in art. Maybe that's because that's what I was praised for, because I was naturally good at [it]. And I know that I have fallen in love with the dance and theater community here.

Men often have interesting stories when it comes to how they discovered dance and Gus is no exception. While attending art school in the late 80's he had a "summer romance" with a young woman who was studying to be a ballerina. Ten years later, circumstance or maybe faith connected him with Philadelphia dance maker Myra Bazell. At the time they both frequented the same coffee shop and started talking. One thing led to another and Gus ended up designing Myra's Fringe show posters. It took another ten years before dance made another attempt to seep into Gus' life. In 2007 he decided to quit his graphic design job and focus more on his paintings. Inadvertently, the decision led him to teaching Commercial Art in Philadelphia's public schools.

I was more optimistic about what teaching was, maybe...downright naive. And there are a lot of problems with the Philadelphia School District and so I got to the point. This is too... not for me. There's too many elements that are either out of my control that I can't fix or I don't have the training and the education to fix... I don't want to be immersed in something that I can't make an impact... There's nothing I can do to help anything... And so I met Annie though teaching (laughs)..., but because she was a bartender.

After a long week of teaching he needed to wind down. That got him across the bar from Annie Wilson—her serving—him processing. Annie had just graduated University of the Arts and started a collaborative dance company called [Pink Hair Affair](#) with seven fellow UArts graduates. Gus went to their shows and got introduced to more of the underground performance art, dance, and theater world.

Fast forward nine years - Gus received a [Rocky Award](#) for his support of the community through his *fiftyone gallery + art space*.

It was so weird and unexpected and such a complete honor.

Annie, now one of the hosts of the Rocky Awards, emailed him under the pretext that she was writing an article about his space. Some unusual questions and nagging texts later, just before the ceremony, Gus was told he was getting a Rocky.

Are you kidding me...but isn't this for people who just perform dance?... I was super nervous to get out there as I'm not a stage person. (To himself) Don't say anything stupid, and don't get too emotional, and don't throw up. I was so touched by Christina (Gesualdi) and Annie (Wilson) showing their appreciation...

One of the reasons I started doing this is [that] I recognized there was a need from [listening to] everybody. Two...I kind of have a little bit of something to offer. It's not as cool as [Fidget](#) or as big as [The Bride](#)... Getting the Rocky was awesome! Wow, that was the icing... maybe I did have a little bit of an impact.

Envisioned by Gus and curated and run by Kevin Meehan *fiftyone gallery + art space* hosted [Four Weeks in January](#) in 2015 and 2016. This fall the space opened its doors to artist in residence Sam Tower. After hearing about the politics of being a woman director, he was excited to support this all-female collaboration.

I think Sam Tower is brilliant... The young women she's working with are brilliant... And it's about how dance and theater can interact with visual art.

I asked him about his plans for the space.

I don't want to be putting expectations on the space, and... expectations on me and what this space might be, because I feel that [this] might actually inhibit or stifle its growth... I have no idea what it can be, or what it wants to be... Eventually it will become whatever it's going to be.

I like not knowing what's going to happen and not really having a concrete mission statement of ideas of what I want to see happen here. I know that if I see something that is not in line with what I would normally think would happen here, I have the freedom to say – yea let's do that.

In the end it comes down to community. And that's one of the most exciting things.

Gus is building the space himself. Most of the furniture is found and some walls and shelves are made of recycled wood. Even though he has a commercial lease, sometimes his neighbors complain because of noise. His lease expires at the end of the year and, as a member of the performance community, I can only hope it gets renewed. With the lack of support from funders and larger institutions *1fiftyone gallery + art space* is one of the few places independent artists can try out ideas, share, and perform.

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