

# NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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## As An "Open Studio," Armory Awes Again

BY **Lucy Gellman** | OCT 14, 2014 10:46 AM

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LUCY GELLMAN PHOTO

Fekieta's *Homeless & Hungry* at Open Studios; 3,000 attended.

Joe Fekieta saw it as a chance to harness some of New Haven's most overlooked voices. Jonathan Sun envisioned the wide, empty stairways and chipping paint as dynamic, integrating several loose and long-abandoned bricks into his work.





Laura Marsh saw opportunity, too. She singled out a window that no one had looked – *really* looked – out of for long time as the right site for her *Untitled [Assymetrical Flag]* (pictured above), a new chance to “reinvent the flag” in a space that had ample room for reinvention.

And for Brian Walters, assigned a spacious, eerie second-floor room overlooking Goffe Street, it was a sign that he needed to work outside his comfort zone.

## Should Open Studios return to the armory next year?

VOTE

RESULTS

Yes

No

Depends on armory's future plans

Beats me

Poll ends: 12/31/14

You haven't voted yet

SUBMIT YOUR VOTE

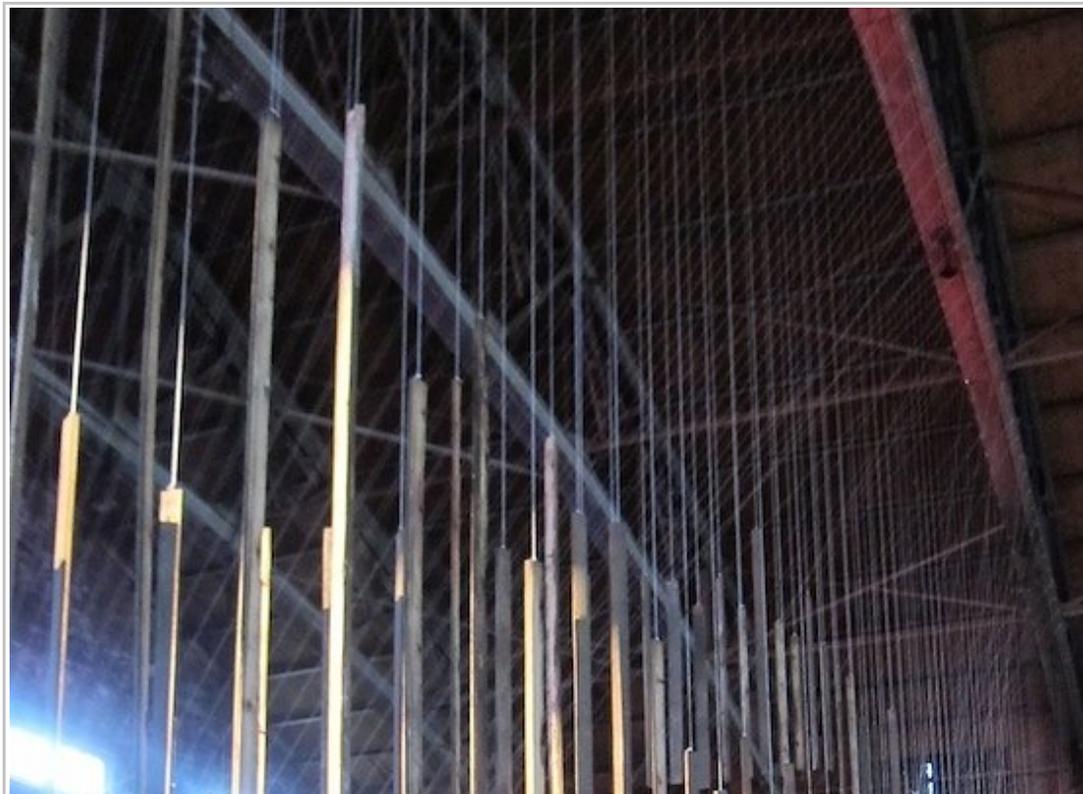
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The *it* in question? The empty old [Armory](#), brought to life for a second year in a row on the first of Artspace's 2014 City Wide Open Studios' [three weekends](#).

Close to 200 artists in all filled the armory with their work this past weekend for what has become a joyous communal rite of fall.

And some did more than just show their work. They made use of the armory itself as inspiration or co-conspirator.

The building fits the bill: it is a fraught and contested historical site, perfect for artists who wished to interface with and construct a dialogue around its physical spaces as they exhibited their work.





“With its almost bewildering array of rooms, and its proximity to DeGale Field which provides great sun light, the armory is the ideal spot for this burst of creative energy,” concluded Artspace Director Helen Kauder when it was all done.



JUDY SIROTA ROSENTHAL PHOTO

Her point had the numbers to back it up: the weekend, which [opened](#) Friday night with a fundraiser, keynote, and curator-led tours, brought in around 3,000 people, including Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and Mayor Toni Harp. For the 198 artists involved – 180 registered for the event, and another 18 produced site-specific works that Artspace had commissioned – responding creatively to the Armory took on myriad interpretations. Only a fraction of the weekend’s richness is captured here.

## Using The Armory To Their Advantage



Fekieta, known by many as "Joey Tomorrow," has worked with the same Armory studio two years in a row. The artist planned his *Homeless and Hungry, 25 cent* project around the room's windows, mirror, chipping white paint, and nearly-hidden door, attentive to the spaces that would let the project come to fruition. As visitors passed by, they were drawn in by Fekieta's small cardboard signs, each based on a "homeless and hungry" foundational theme. If they made it in, he would send them off with one, a reminder that blight in the city is never that far away, and shouldn't specifically be shunned out of sight either.

"I was born and raised in New Haven," he said. "I've been here my whole life except for my time in the army and college. I live currently in the Hill, I've been there for 27 years, and I live around the corner from Columbus House, so I see homeless people all the time. I've been thinking about it for a long time and I just really wanted to work with the subject matter. The piece represents spiritual decay. The shoes represent them – they're like ghosts. I did this installation for this room, and the project does come out of my experience living in New Haven."





Or [Walters](#), whose Armory-inspired *Laser Chaos* marked the beginning of something new for the artist, used to sculpting with salvaged materials and metals. On Saturday, he described the site as a divine sign to turn to a new medium and see where he could go with it.

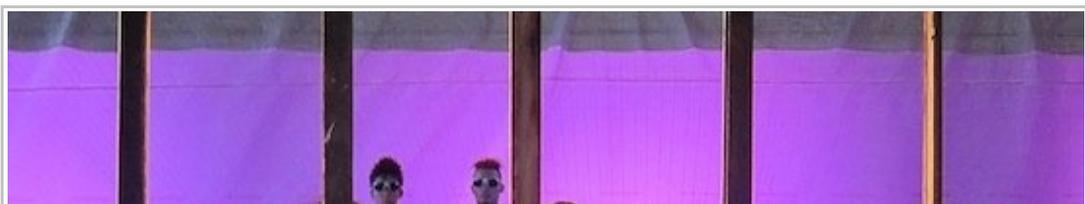
"It was a blank space ... a blank canvas for me. What I wanted to do was to use this weekend as a catalyst to pursue this new installation work I'm doing. *Laser Chaos* ... it's kind of an interview with the working of my brain, the inner thought process to creative projects in my life. This is definitely a departure from what I normally do, but City Wide Open Studios is a great venue to pursue the challenging projects that you have."



Howard el-Yasin pushed it one step further, taking his shared first-floor studio as a chance to explore the curious things that happened when a project about history, detritus and reclamation was installed in a space echoing loudly of them.

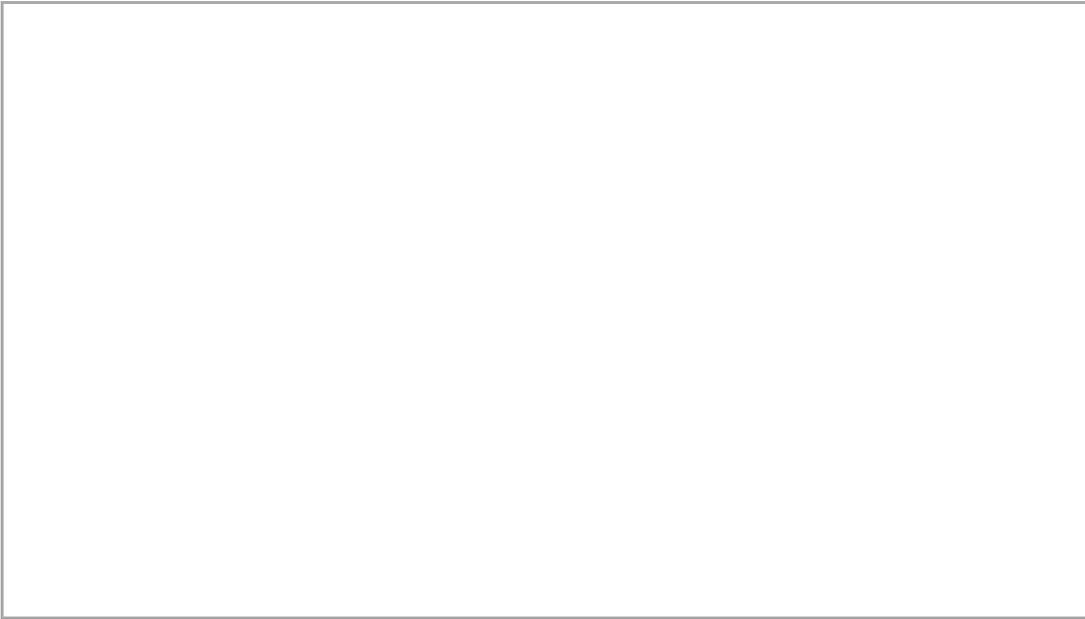
"This is an ongoing work where I'm collecting reclaimed paper bags, brown paper bags, because they reference detritus and that's something I'm interested in in terms of materiality. After visiting the space I became enamored with this doorway, because I'm interested in working with multiple spaces being in more than one space at one time, if not visually, physically. I'm interested in how one's body interacts in spaces, and so the heights vary, based on what I perceive as human interaction with space," he explained.

For this reason, some of the weekend's most powerful pieces were found among the 18 [site-responsive commissions](#), selected by Artspace curator Sarah Fritchey ...





... and site-specific performances in the Drill Hall, like one by the [Elm City Dance Collective](#), set only to the sound of attendees walking the floorboards and discussing the art.



Works like Regan Avery's *War Stories*, a series of sound recordings of young American boys placed in the Armory's second floor changing room lockers (excerpt above), and Jeanne Criscola & Joan Fitzsimmons' *Oral History: A Recipe for Memory*, across the hallway in the old Armory kitchen, revisited the building's past life.

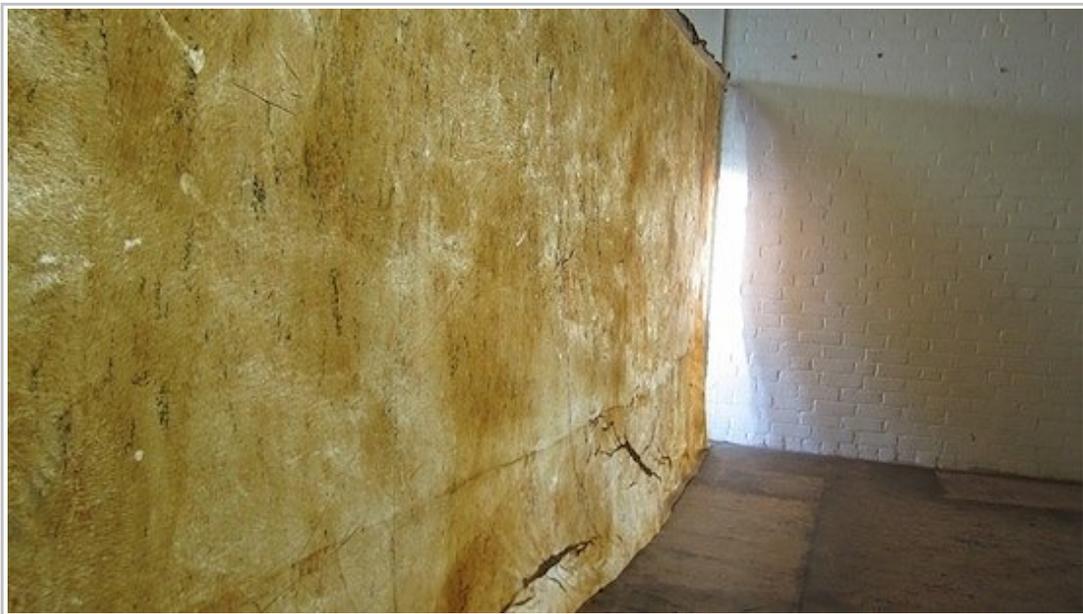




Oral History: A Recipe for Memory.

Michael Galvin and Kyle Skar's *Palimpsest*, meanwhile, sought to re-purpose the room while leaving an imprint of its current life through use of spray-on latex, used in historic restorations.

"Really what we're looking to do here is twofold. This was an existing office partition ... we wanted to evoke the same sensibility of the room that had been removed, to evoke the presence of the wall that was taken away. The other is deal with illumination and transportation. We're sort of archiving and cleaning the floor ... literally building the space with a clean floor. This was really just a pure exploration of material and process."

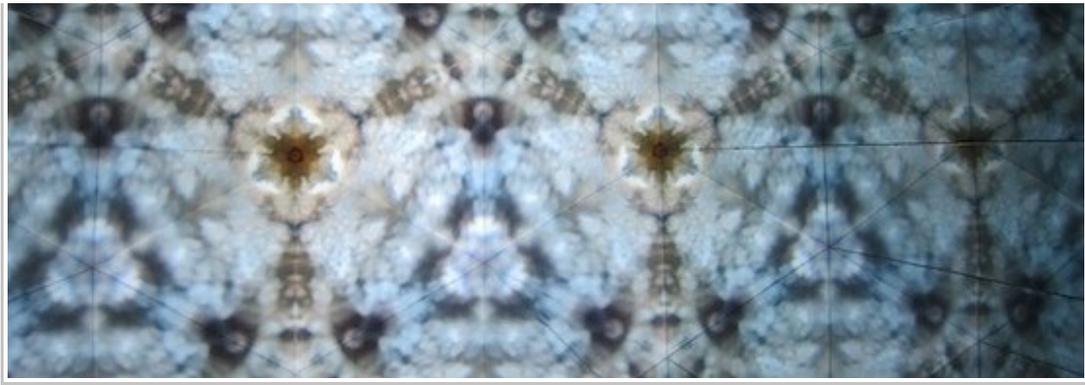


Palimpsest.

### Running With a Theme

Creative interpretations didn't stop at the Armory as a space, however. Several artists – both those working through site-specific commissions and those not – responded to this year's theme of *Transported/Illuminated*, taking their viewers on a sensory and visual journey that extended far beyond New Haven, and at times, beyond this earthly universe.





Just off the Drill Hall, Megan Czekaj and Mark Geist's site-responsive *Observation of Beautiful Forms* (projection, kaleidoscopes; pictured above) made the familiar unfamiliar and the real unreal ...



... while Susan McCaslin's "Fears and Familiarity" (pictured above) merged indoor and outdoor spaces to address "the effect of familiarity on our fears ... bringing the outside in – taming it for our own comfort" ...





... and Anna Russel's small landscape paintings, sawed strips of original 4x6 compositions that transported the viewer into intimate seaside scenes and intimated thick, lush woodlands. "Doing this has really helped me learn how to paint on a smaller scale ... and I feel like I'm kind of in a point of transition, so this is a transitory time for me too."

Artists like [Pam Erickson](#), meanwhile, used the theme to transport her viewers to the afterlife. Her work, a shrine to her late husband, was also intended to literally play on illumination, yoking strings of light and fibrous, knitted clothing for a tomb-like effect in the dark, cool space.



"The armory didn't [change my process], but the theme did ... I had to work it in," she explained.

[Jon Seals](#) pushed the theme a step further, trading *Transported* for *Transparent* and offering viewers some slightly distorted, Bellows-esque paintings that responded to his brother's untimely death last year.





COURTESY JON SEALS

Standing in front of one, a painting of two figures wrestling outside of a barn, he explained: "In going home, I was wrestling with my thoughts, what to do with them, where to place them, and how I could respond to my situation. So these are paintings very much in process and about process ... the process of grieving, the process of creating."

Which in turn, on a larger scale, was what the first weekend was ultimately about: the process of creating, in all its wacky, changing, messy, beautiful forms.



Allison Hornak's A Struggle, A Painting in Two Acts, 2 Day Performance





Dooley-O's graffiti mural outside of the armory.

"It's going really beautifully. Everybody's really positive ... members of the community are reacting really well. We have just about 200 bodies here, and it's huge. It's a really loving community that's come together. The wonderful and surprisingly sobering thing about Open Studios is that everyone comes together and works together ... It's just like family," said Shelly Stevens, Artspace's CWOS artist liaison.

"The nice thing about coming back here is that people have felt it out. They have responded to it in a way that is relevant, and interesting, and beautiful ... and kind of challenging art work that makes you think about where you are, and what it could be."

*The next City Wide Open Studios event is this coming weekend weekend, Oct. 18-19. Read more about it [here](#). Curators from far and wide will be leading specialized studio tours; learn more and sign up for them [here](#).*

**Tags:** [Citywide Open Studios](#), [Goffe Street Armory](#), [New Haven Armory](#)

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## Comments

**posted by: jennstockwell on October 14, 2014 11:24am**

I have mixed feelings about CWOS taking over the same building several years in a row: I like when it changes location—you get a chance to see a different building (many of which are pieces of art themselves), a different part of town, work within different physical parameters, etc. That being said, though, as both a past participant and yearly visitor, some of the spaces have been downright difficult to show in and/or get around. The Pirelli building comes to mind... and though i was only a visitor at The Register, it seemed like a hard space to show in. But I think that mostly it's the site-specific work that loses a bit of luster when the location remains the same. My vote would be to take it one of two directions—changing the location more frequently and pushing artists to incorporate the site/story more and also involving the neighborhood somehow; or take advantage of using one amazing space (like The Armory) for as long as it's available but using the fact that the location is static to its advantage—maybe less site-specific and more collaborative, or instead of assigning spots randomly, grouping things somehow... I guess I want to feel like the choice of using The Armory is a decision that's being made consciously, not just as a default.

And this is a total aside—I'm sure everyone including CWOS staff/organizers wanted this—but MORE FOOD TRUCKS. We were there Noon-2 on Sunday, and the one lone food truck was a bit of a disappointment. We would've stayed a lot longer if we'd known beforehand that there was only going to be one choice and had eaten.

**posted by: ResidenceNewHaven on October 15, 2014 11:37am**

I love this use of the Armory. But Jennstockwell's idea about involving the site and neighborhood more deeply is great!