

## ***Art as Space, Space as Art - Part II***

George Suyama/Suyama Space

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*Floating Mechanism (nightshade)*  
Claudia Fitch



George Suyama

George Suyama's second career as an art gallery owner began serendipitously, with a vacant room. In 1996, he moved his architectural firm into a century-old building in Belltown. The 1907 concrete structure was a challenging space with multiple levels above and below the street, connected by ramps. Formerly a livery stable that survived the Denny Regrade, then an auto garage, its heavy timber structure was stained by smoke and oil. He carved out two small retail spaces at the front of the building on either side of an existing ramp to the basement. His architecture office occupies two levels at the back, leaving a large open space 25 feet high spanned by wooden trusses across the middle of the building.

"We knew we didn't want to have an office that large, so that interior space was always meant sort of as a void, as something that would be decided later," says Suyama. A longtime advocate for the arts, he initially rented the space to art galleries that used it to display oversized works.

Curator Beth Sellars first saw the space in 1997, while searching for an installation venue for New York artist Lynne Yamamoto. Sculptor Peter Millett suggested she contact Suyama.

"I have this architect friend who owns this building but hasn't decided how to use this one really beautiful space in the building," Sellars recalls him saying.

"George initially said he would be happy to rent the space to me for the show, but when he saw [Yamamoto's] work, he said, 'Forget the rent. You can have the space,' and the rest is history. We did the show and it was well reviewed up and down the west coast. After the show was over, George asked me if I would like to do more." That handshake arrangement has lasted twelve years during which

time Suyama Space has become one of a handful of private non-profit arts venues in Seattle that is gaining national recognition for presenting cutting edge work.

“We’ve never really sat down and seriously discussed structure and that’s the beauty of the whole operation. Neither he nor I like bureaucracy,” says Sellars. “But we both tend to have the same visual sensibility.”

Initially, Suyama Space was subsidized by George Suyama’s architectural practice along with small grants obtained by Sellars, a former museum director and public art collection manager. In 2000, Suyama Space partnered with the non-profit Space.City.

Over time, Suyama and Sellars have built a funding base of grants and private donations to cover the costs of artists, materials, and publications. Suyama Peterson Deguchi continues to underwrite the space and a half-time gallery assistant.

Suyama Space retains the character of its rugged origins. On bright days, skylights cast shadows of the massive roof trusses on tall white walls. The trusses and floor timbers bear the marks of use as a garage. After seeing two-dimensional art works overwhelmed by the architecture, Suyama and Sellars narrowed the gallery’s focus to large scale single-artist installations. Artists spend a month in residence, constructing works designed to respond to the space. Some are internationally known, from all over North America and abroad. Others are young Northwest artists for whom Suyama Space is a prestigious commission.

“It’s DNA. It’s what he’s made up of,” says Sellars of Suyama. “He is an artist/architect, not an engineer/architect and he has a wonderful sensibility.”

Out of town artists stay in a guest cabin adjoining Suyama’s house while working in residence, and Sellars ventures that “I think that’s one of the perks for him. He enjoys that access to the artists, getting inside their heads.”

“What I would love to do is to bring the best and the most inspirational artists to the gallery,” says Suyama of his aspirations for his eponymous Space.

“I’d like to have things that are really thoughtful. We’re not commercial, so we don’t need to sell the work. But I really want to make it worthwhile for people to come and see it. I think it’s the same level of desire and inspiration that I would like to have in the architecture we build. To have people walk in and have a visceral sense, a visceral change in the way they see or feel a space.”