



Enter the Firecat

by Robyn Farrell Roulo

The True Story of Dime Star & Other Fictions

Firecat Projects

2124 North Damen Avenue, Chicago, Illinois
60647

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In May 2009 I wrote about Tony Fitzpatrick's [Big Cat Press](#), the artist's Bucktown studio and innovative exhibition space. A year and a half later, Fitzpatrick has transformed the neighborhood stalwart into a gallery and publishing house, moving his studio elsewhere.

After 17 years at 2124 North Damen, the Chicago artist will no longer work in the (semi) public eye, retreating to his home studio as a full-time creative space. Like many Chicagoans, I will miss the opportunity to stop in and see the artist at work, but look forward to the monthly exhibitions at the newly opened venue, Firecat Projects.

Different from the artist-run organizations, apartment galleries and commercial spaces that populate Chicago's artistic landscape, Firecat introduces a new approach to the Chicago gallery system: the gallery is for-profit and commission-free. But why? Why would an artist privy to the ups-and-downs, the politics and the complexities of running a gallery choose to enter into the volatile arena of the art world?

One reason to move the studio back to his home that Fitzpatrick noted is the quiet of his home allows for more concentration and fewer interruptions, which is understandable after years of opening his studio up to anyone just passing by. But more than that, both Fitzpatrick and his long time business partner, Stan Klein, recognized a void in Chicago, the national art community and felt that it was time for a change. Fitzpatrick explained, "I decided to set an example-- Why not try an exhibition space that takes NO percentage from the artist? It was an interesting thought that finally got the best of me. It is what Firecat Projects will do."

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Fitzpatrick and Klein developed the concept while driving to Los Angeles last year. Klein said most of their conversation on the trip centered on the number of good artists they knew that haven't received the attention they deserved, a reality that faces so many artists today. In less than a year, the two have now set out to bridge the gap between artists, galleries and collectors.

Both veterans of the art business, Fitzpatrick and Klein have experience with the complex and mostly antiquated dealings of art. They recognized a great divide first hand: between the traditional gallery model and the artist. Using his career as a model, Mr. Fitzpatrick will provide the space and resources for artists to have a voice, exhibit their work and connect with collectors. Under Fitzpatrick's model, artists are responsible for getting their work to their collectors and building those relationships, thereby playing a significant role in their own success. This is something Tony Fitzpatrick has mastered in his own career, and like a true Chicagoan, it's something he would like to share with his fellow artists, "I decided after watching some artists that I admire getting stuck in the mud of the art world, that this 1,900 square feet would be better served by providing a space for them."



Stopping by the gallery last week, I met Stan Klein and artist [Randy Regier](#) just before the installation of his first solo show in Chicago. Regier expressed his excitement over Firecat's new approach, commenting that he looks forward to having complete control and responsibility for his work, "knowing the deadlines" and "be[ing] accountable" are important factors for artists and through better time management, they contribute to better artwork.

No appointment was required when I popped in. Klein, was more than helpful and available, even amidst a flurry of activity: the delivery of Fitzpatrick's latest publication, the de-installation of the inaugural show, "The Night Parade" and preparation for Regier's "The True Story of Dime Star & Other Fictions" in just four days. This is exactly what Klein and Fitzpatrick want: a space for the artist and the community.

Despite all the work involved, it's exciting to be part of something new and providing the new space to artists and the community makes it seem, to an outsider at least, that the hubbub is all part of the plan. Regier's opening on Friday presented a mixed array of sculpture and nostalgia that engaged a relatively packed crowd, especially considering the frigid temperatures. The gallery, that had previously exhibited the poetic collaged works of the Tony Fitzpatrick himself, was converted into a real-time vintage toy store through the eyes of its creator, Randy Regier. This is a small testament to what Firecat aspires to provide. The space will change and reconfigure with each exhibition, with no prescription of a specific theme or motif the space will be guided by the art. Fitzpatrick and Klein know this artistic freedom will work and speak to the community. They recognize that just because an artist doesn't fit into a certain niche or gallery program, doesn't mean that their work shouldn't be available to the public.



For the next two years the gallery will exhibit work and collaborate with a variety of artists, producing promotional cards, posters and openings, but leaving most of the technical logistics up to the exhibiting artists. Prices for work will range from \$200 to \$5,000 which allows for young and emerging collectors, along with established Chicagoans, to start a collection or discover a new work from an otherwise underrepresented artist. With most of the revenue coming from the publishing division of Firecat, this allows the gallery to exhibit without conventional norms or boundaries. Artists considered for exhibition are discussed by Fitzpatrick and Klein. It has to be artwork they like, sometimes friends are selected and veteran artists are invited from all over the country.

Regier's work will be on view thru mid-January. Ahe schedule through May will be: **Jenny Scobel** in January, Duncan Robert Anderson in February, **Alex Blau** in March and **Joe Amrhein** (of Pierogi Gallery in Brooklyn) in April. Even though Fitzpatrick is no longer at the Damen location on a daily basis, the artist is dedicated and ever-present to the new project, " My business partner and publisher Stan Klein is in charge there now, [but] I will be there a lot. It is the place I built and I'm very proud of it. My show will be the first exhibition at Firecat.....it is a way of saying Hello and Goodbye at the same time."

In addition to Randy Regier's opening at Firecat Projects on Friday, Tony Fitzpatrick also celebrated his latest publication, "This Train: An Artist's Journal" on Sunday, December 19th with a book signing party at Fitzgerald's in Berwyn. He is currently working on writing a play for an ensemble cast for "This Train," the acclaimed one man show that ran at the 16th Street Theater and Steppenwolf Theater in 2010.

For updates on Firecat and Fitzpatrick's other projects, please visit his website at <http://tonyfitzpatrick.com/home.html> and blog, <http://tonyfitzpatrick.wordpress.com/>.

-Robyn Farrell Roulo, ArtSlant Staff Writer

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