Seattle artist collective celebrates 30 years of outside-the-box art

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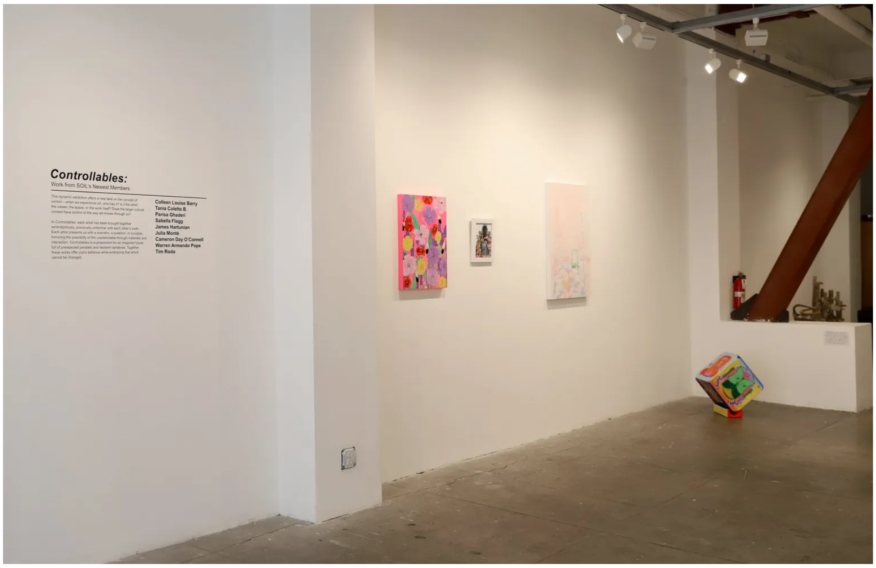
Controllables:
Work from SOIL's Newest Members
This dynamic exhibition offers a new take on the concept of control – when we experience art, who has it? Is it the artist, the viewer, the space, or the work itself? Does the larger cultural context have control of the way art moves through us?
In Controllables, each artist has been brought together serendipitously, previously unfamiliar with each other's work. Each artist presents us with a scenario, a question, or a puzzle, honoring the possibility of the unpredictable through materials and interaction. Controllables is a proposition for an imagined future, full of unexpected parallels and resilient narratives. Together, these works offer joyful defiance while embracing that which cannot be changed.
Colleen Louise Barry
Tania Colette B.
Parisa Ghaderi
Sabella Flagg
James Hartunian
Julia Monté
Cameron Day O'Connell
Warren Armando Pope
Tim Roda

1 of 2 | "Controllables," a show featuring the work of SOIL's newest members, is on view at the Seattle artist collective's nonprofit gallery through Feb. 22. (Courtesy of SOIL)

By Rachel Gallaher

Special to The Seattle Times

A laboratory. A kitchen. A bridge — flexible but structurally sound. Those are the ways that artists describe SOIL, a Seattle nonprofit gallery and artist collective that turns 30 this year.

Founded in 1995 by Seattle artists creating work that often didn't fit squarely into commercial galleries, SOIL has brought creatives together for three decades to collaborate, support each other's work and share projects, ideas and opinions.

Since its inception, the spirit of SOIL has been its focus on experimentation, collaboration and boundary-pushing exhibitions, relying on members to keep things running smoothly. The organization's longevity is noteworthy in a region where there is dwindling financial support for the arts community overall.

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"The way that SOIL governs itself is very lateral or egalitarian and fiercely so," said multidisciplinary artist and curator Genevieve Tremblay.

Celebrated Seattle painter Margie Livingston, a winner of Seattle Art Museum's Betty Bowen Award and a SOIL member since 2002, added, "I don't think everyone realizes that it's a huge commitment to be a part of SOIL. It takes a lot of time and dedication to keep things functioning."

ADVERTISING

The gallery's current show, "Controllables" (through Feb. 22), features work from SOIL's newest members. As that show runs, we looked back at the organization's rich 30-year history.

A place to experiment

SOIL's reputation as a haven for outside-the-box art has long attracted experimental artists and those looking to push creative boundaries. In addition to work done in traditional mediums like painting, sculpture and photography, the gallery has embraced a wide range of artistic formats: video art, chocolate art, performances, poetry readings, sound installations.

SOIL first planted its roots across the street from the Seattle Art Museum downtown; Livingston remembers attending openings at the gallery, which "was 3,000 square feet for something like $300 a month. It was this big, cavernous warehouse, and there would be up to three different shows at any time. People would line up down the street just to get in."

FRESH SQUEEZED JUICES
HOT/ICED DRINKS
ART

1 of 2 | Curator Marsha Sleeth is shown in front of her gallery, Lead, in July 1995, when SOIL artists put on a show there. (Laurie Cinotto)

SOIL later moved to Pioneer Square (for the first time), then had two Capitol Hill homes before settling in Pioneer Square's Tashiro Kaplan Artist Lofts in 2004. For the last 20 years, SOIL artists and visiting artists have shown work in the white-walled, concrete-floored space.

The gallery itself is a fitting visual metaphor for SOIL.

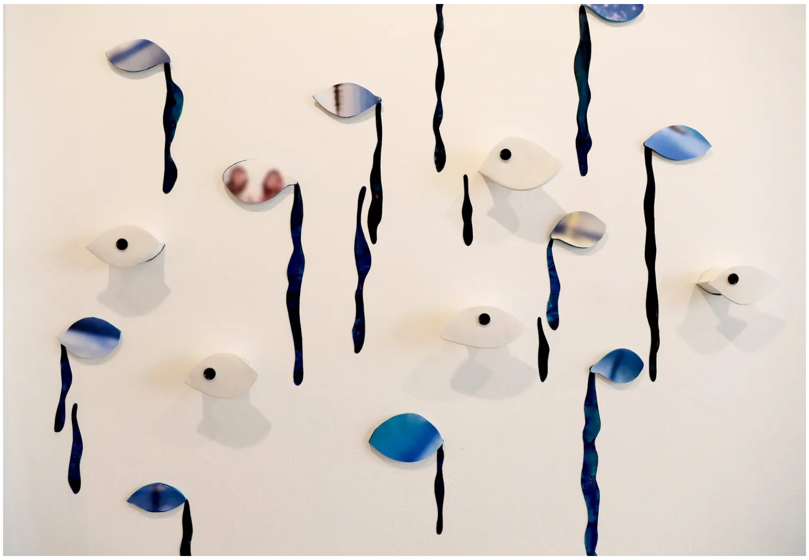
"After the Nisqually earthquake, Pioneer Square's historic buildings were reinforced with large X-shaped beams," said Italian artist and architect Iole Alessandrini, a 16-year SOIL member. "At SOIL, one of these X-beams stands two-thirds into the gallery, naturally dividing the space — giving the larger front area to invited artists and the smaller backspace to members. This structural necessity is more than support — it shapes SOIL's balance between invitation and continuity, giving emerging and underrepresented artists a platform to share their voices."

The show “Stratum” is shown in January 2016; it was an all-SOIL-member show that turned the gallery over to the artists, who launched miniature solo shows simultaneously around the same room. (Christopher Buening)

Alessandrini was once one of those visiting artists. In 2007, two years before she became a member, Alessandrini mounted an immersive installation, “Hidden Spaces,” in which hidden, laser-created planes of light were revealed through interaction by gallerygoers.

ADVERTISING

“SOIL has been instrumental in showcasing my work,” Alessandrini said. “It’s a space where you can experiment, just like in a lab or kitchen, where you’re not necessarily following a recipe, but you find something that works and can repeat it because it resonates.”



Parisa Ghaderi’s “The Quality of Tears” on display as part of SOIL’s “Controllables” show that runs through Feb. 22. (Courtesy of SOIL)

Sometimes, that means the freedom to show midprocess pieces — which feels radical in the context of traditional gallery systems.

“I have a space to show work that doesn’t always have to be polished or finished,” said Iranian artist Parisa Ghaderi, who joined SOIL last year. “It can be vulnerable. That's not happening in the arts scene as much. We always want to see the end thing that's polished and pedestal-ready."

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When Ghaderi moved to Seattle in 2023, she initially felt uprooted after 14 years in Michigan, but soon found a community in SOIL. Here, she said, "everyone is just trying to be helpful, resourceful and generous."

Colleen Louise Barry, who also joined last year, echoed that sentiment. She learned about SOIL's model and its members through events like the First Thursday art walk in Pioneer Square.

"There is something so magical about the free-flowing nature of SOIL. About how it shifts and changes," she said. "It's not just you doing everything by yourself; it's a completely different setup than any other space in Seattle. It's not hierarchical, not obsessed with running a profit, yet it's been here for so long and (has) become such a staple for this community. That's why I wanted to be a part of it."

ADVERTISING

The volunteer-run nonprofit currently has 28 members, each paying $35 a month in dues, which have remained the same for three decades. New members are accepted every 18 months or so if their applications are approved by two-thirds of the collective. Within the group, there are committees or individuals that take on various roles to keep SOIL running: scheduling shifts in the gallery, planning the shows, writing grants, social media. Artists meet biweekly and anyone can pitch ideas for shows, which happen roughly monthly.

SOIL collective members are shown at a meeting on Oct. 21, 2024. (Quinton Merada)

Dues and volunteer hours only go so far: SOIL is dependent on donations and grants, too. The group has received about $172,000 in grant funds since 2020, including a three-year, unrestricted Sustained Support grant from the city of Seattle's 4Culture program. The funds will be used to continue the gallery's free public programming, to increase stipends for artists and creators, and to advance archival initiatives for the group.

Tremblay, the multidisciplinary artist and curator, joined SOIL in 2020. She's now working on an interactive data visualization project that maps out the 30-year history of SOIL and the connections between each of its 170 past and present members.

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"It's almost like a fraternity where you're attached to these other legacy members, right?" Tremblay said. "I thought there was a lot of potential and richness in that, so I wrote a grant for this project."

As SOIL looks ahead to the next 30 years, a continued priority is engagement in curatorial exchanges both nationally and internationally. An example is last year's "Interweaving the Archive," in which SOIL hosted Colectiva Tramando, a group of female Chilean weavers, for a show that examined the intersection of textile art and political history. Currently, the collective is displaying work at Mexico City's Tlaxcala3 arts space, and during the Seattle Art Fair this summer, SOIL will present work organized and curated by Tlaxcala3.

This openness to diverse ideas, people and culture is the bedrock of SOIL — something that has helped the organization thrive for decades in Seattle's ever-changing art scene. Mixing in the hard work of dedicated member artists, SOIL laid a foundation for long-term success.

"There's something about the mix," Tremblay said. "It's like an engineer building a bridge, where you use this mix of materials that makes the thing flexible — but makes it stay up forever."

"Controllables"

SOIL kicks off its 2025 programming with "Controllables," on display through Feb. 22; 112 Third Ave. S., Seattle; 206-264-8061; soilart.org/2025-exhibitions

***Rachel Gallaher**: is a freelance writer and editor living in Seattle.*

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