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## Photography & Art >> ‘Secret City’ Shines a Spotlight on New York Artists

by *Enzo Scavone*

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Once a month, on Sunday at 11:30 a.m., art enthusiasts meet at Dixon Place on the Lower East Side in New York for an event called “Secret City.” Led by Chris Wells, the participants enjoy each other’s company, look for support, and worship art. The Secret City is very popular among its followers and has been growing ever since its establishment in 2007.

The event takes place in a theater and lasts an hour and a half. Under Wells’ direction, it features a band, singers, a mingling exercise, storytelling, and a discussion about the work of a monthly-changing artist who has been invited to speak. The audience can talk directly with the artist and hear more about his or her creative process. A recent gathering featured harpist/singer-songwriter Gillian Grassie. This award-winning young musician, who has received grants from the Thomas J. Watson Foundation and the U.S. State Department, plays a “blend of jazz-inflected indie folk/pop. While just an undergrad at Bryn Mawr, she released two albums: “To An Unwitting Muse,” in 2005 and “Serpentine,” in 2007, and has now played in many prestigious venues around the world.

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by Sandip Roy

The color and visual splendor of India tends to overwhelm any film that is set in India. And *Life of Pi* is no exception. Ang Lee pretty much admits as much to DNA when he says “the country overwhelms you, with the warmth, the culture and its beauty”. Even in the hands of a director as astute as him, India feels over saturated, wide-eyed and eye-popping, prone to fortune cookie maxim. It’s a striking contrast to the richly detailed but so much more atmospheric Shanghai he created for *Lust, Caution*. That felt epic and intimate at the same time. This India feels Amar Chitra Katha – bold colors without much shading. [Read more...](#)

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by Emma Mincks

While one scholarship alone would not undo years of socioeconomic stratification or completely change achievement outcomes between social classes, the lottery scholarship was envisioned as a way to bridge this gap. Although the scholarship aims to reduce the disparity in academic achievement between poorer and more privileged students, and to encourage all students to attend college, it may not necessarily cover the cost of school for the students who receive it. [Read more...](#)



In September, visual artist John Devaney showcased some of his paintings. He favors public spaces and the human form as his subject matter and captures “the endless parade of life”. Devaney is a former faculty member of The Museum of Fine Art in Boston, the Art Institute of Boston, and Carpenter Center of Harvard University. One of his commissioned murals is on display in the University of Connecticut’s Natatorium.

Secret City is a gathering of the artistic community; it offers a ritual that is supposed to balance out the fleetingness of daily life, and it doesn’t coerce you into doing or thinking something. Everyone can explore their connection to creativity in their own way. After the event, the majority of the attendees usually sticks around in the lobby for coffee, snacks, and a chat. Most of the people who frequent the Secret City work in an artistic field like acting, photography, and puppetry.



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In conversations the attendees mention that they come to the Secret City to enjoy a sense of belonging. Furthermore, its function as a ritual energizes them, and the break they get from their daily struggles puts them back in touch with their creativity.

The founder of the Secret City is Chris Wells. He was born in California and his artistic development led him to work in various fields like theater, singing, and dance. The different experiences he had fostered a desire to unite different forms of art so they could benefit from each other's strengths. But as often happens, with time, more important issues took over -- mostly those connected with figuring out how to earn a living -- and the realization of his desire had to be postponed. When he moved to New York he regained his original motivation. The need resurged for something to bring different artists together and make "the struggle [as an artist in New York] worthwhile," according to Wells.



Drawing from this sentiment, he conceived the Secret City in 2007. Initially it was held in a room on 14th Street with a handful of attendees, most of whom were Wells' friends. Word got out and people became curious. Since then, it has grown tremendously and achieved its first honor in 2010 when it was awarded an Obie by the *Village Voice* under the category "Special Citation." This past summer the Secret City achieved a second highlight when it began adding events in Los Angeles, where it was eagerly awaited and became a great success with more than a hundred attendees.

To explain the idea behind the Secret City, Wells suggests looking at the event as performance art with an interactive component. Being more than just a *matinée* or a musical performance, it tries to engage the audience and trigger a thought process about creativity. Great emphasis is placed on the awareness of the isolation of artists due to the pressures they have to face in a commercial world and the creative void they risk falling into. The Secret City addresses this problem by offering attendees with artistic interests contact with artists and other like-minded individuals in an environment that is free of pressure and most importantly, spawns further creativity.





An example of this furthering of creativity took place recently at the Secret City in Los Angeles, when an invited group of artists from “Art Division” ([artdivision.org](http://artdivision.org)), a project that mentors young inner-city and at-risk artists, created a collaborative painting. The piece was later donated to the space where the Secret City was held and now adorns the lobby of the Bootleg Theater.

Elements like this are what make the Secret City gatherings so special. On one hand, an individual can attend and retain something meaningful from it. On the other hand, the whole event gives something back to the community and creates artefacts that enrich people’s lives. It contrasts typical cultural events which celebrate themselves and leave the attendees alone in finding a connection and putting what they experience in a bigger context.

#### Bio:

*Enzo Scavone is a contributing writer at Highbrow Magazine.*

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