

RITTENHOUSE SQUARE FINE ART SHOW - REFLECTION

Lily Wallis, Fall 2024

When I began my internship with the Rittenhouse Square Fine Art Show (RSFAS), I wasn't entirely sure which direction to take my project. The show's history, as the oldest outdoor fine art show in the country, felt both expansive and greatly personal to consider. Initially, I grappled with how to approach such a multifaceted story. Should I focus on the evolution of its organizational structure, artistic legacy, or impact on Philadelphia's cultural landscape? It wasn't until I started conducting interviews—more than eight of them with board members, artists, and long-time attendees—that the pieces started falling into place. Listening to their stories, I began to understand what makes the RSFAS more than just an event: it's a living, breathing phenomenon that has shaped and been shaped by Philadelphia for almost a century.

These interviews became the backbone of my project. One artist recounted their first show as a pivotal moment in their career, while a board member reflected on decades of managing an event that is both a logistical feat and a labor of love. Each conversation felt like peeling back another layer of the show's identity, revealing not just its historical milestones but also the deep personal associations that sustain it. The RSFAS is not just about showcasing art; it's about building relationships, creating opportunities, and keeping a tradition alive. Every person I spoke with added another layer to the story, making it clear that the RSFAS thrives because of the people who believe in it and contribute to its legacy.

Beyond interviews, I immersed myself in archival research to complement these narratives. I consulted resources like ProQuest, Temple University's Library, and the Free Library of Philadelphia to uncover primary and secondary sources that provided historical

context. Reading through old documents, articles, and photographs, I traced the show's evolution—from a small, student-led clothesline exhibition in 1928 to a nationally recognized fine art event. Witnessing this progression through archival materials felt like unraveling a thread that tied together decades of artistic ambition, community engagement, and cultural resilience. The more I uncovered, the more evident it became that the RSFAS is not just an art fair but a cornerstone of Philadelphia's cultural fabric. In many respects, this project evolved into an investigation of humanity as seen through the eyes of a particular, ingrained artistic group.

One of the most inspiring aspects of the RSFAS is that it is, at its heart, by artists and for artists. This ethos shapes everything the organization does, from the way it structures its board to how it curates its exhibitions. The artists involved in producing the RSFAS are not just participants—they're leaders, decision-makers, and advocates for the show's future. This artist-centered approach has been instrumental in the show's longevity and success, ensuring that it remains relevant and meaningful to those it serves. For me, this model is a powerful example of how artistic institutions can create spaces that are not only inclusive but also empowering, giving artists a platform to share their work while actively contributing to the event's legacy.

As an art history major, I've spent countless hours analyzing art objects in isolation—examining their formal qualities, historical contexts, and cultural meanings. This internship, however, reminded me that art is inseparable from the people who create, support, and experience it. The RSFAS isn't just about the art displayed in Rittenhouse Square; it's about the relationships it fosters. It's about families returning year after year, strangers striking up conversations over a painting, artists mentoring emerging talent, and the collective effort to sustain a tradition that enriches everyone involved. On a broader level, this work has reinforced why preserving cultural events like the RSFAS is so important. In an increasingly digital world,

where genuine interactions can feel fleeting and impersonal, there's something incredibly grounding about an in-person experience centered on authenticity and reciprocity. Events like the RSFAS remind us of the value of being in community with one another—not just as spectators, but as active participants in a shared cultural dialogue. They create space for reflection, inspiration, and connection, producing a sense of belonging that feels exceedingly rare in today's world.

And yet, this internship has also left me with questions about the future of events like the RSFAS and the art sector more broadly. How can long-standing events like this adapt to the needs of new generations while remaining true to their roots? How can they ensure greater accessibility and inclusivity, reflecting the full diversity of the communities they serve? What does sustainability look like in a world where funding for the arts is often precarious? These are questions I will carry with me as I continue to navigate the art world and consider my own role within it.

In retrospect, this experience has been gratifying both academically and personally. It has given me a richer understanding of how art can act as a catalyst for community and how traditions like the RSFAS can endure and evolve through shared commitment and care. More than anything, it has left me with a sense of curiosity and hope about how we can continue to build spaces like this — spaces that bring people together, celebrate creativity, and honor the relationships that make art possible.

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