



Catching the Crest of the L.E.S. Wave

By [DAVID COHEN](#) | November 8, 2007

Art can sometimes seem like a subcategory of real estate, especially if you are trying to keep pace with the New York scene. The words on the collective mouth of the art world these days are the same as those passing the lips of real estate brokers: "Lower East Side." A sleeper arts district since around 2002, this area has gained critical mass. Including rumors of imminent openings, there are, at last count, 23 galleries in the neighborhood bounded by the streets roughly east of the Bowery and topped and tailed by Houston and East Broadway.

But those boundaries are nebulous in what remains a sprawling entity. Some young galleries sprouting in the lower reaches of SoHo are counted in with the Lower East Side phenomenon, rather than with their actual neighbors, the last survivors of SoHo when it was the artistic epicenter. And one of the Lower East Side pioneers, Rivington Arms, which took its name from the street at the heart of the "bargain district" still mostly filled with tailors and garment retailers, has gone north of Houston to the corner of East 2nd Street and the Bowery, to nestle up to the new New Museum, which will open its doors a few blocks away on December 1.

The Lower East Side for many will recall the East Village scene of the 1980s, when an art district sprang up and evaporated as suddenly as a gold-rush town. Another point of comparison is Williamsburg, a scene that once seemed a riposte to Manhattan but now feels like a community service to Brooklyn. Williamsburg, unlike the Manhattan districts, provides homes and studios for a large concentration of artists who define the character of the neighborhood with its bohemian bars and cafés. Pierogi 2000, the pioneering gallery there, has a particular aesthetic of obsessive touch that somehow relates to the former light-industrial, artisanal spaces where artists now work. One of the more interesting Williamsburg galleries, meanwhile, 31 Grand, recently decamped to Ludlow Street.

What leads both new and established gallerists to forge a new district? And what impact, if any, does the novelty of their surroundings have on the art they produce, what art gets shown, and how that art is experienced?

Relative affordability, the buzz of the new New Museum, and the company of others are the obvious incentives of the Lower East Side. But more to the point is a sense of exhaustion with the behemoth art district of the last 15 years, Chelsea. There are several hundred galleries in western Chelsea, between 14th and 29th streets, and between Tenth and Twelfth avenues. Although condominiums have arrived with a vengeance, there is little by the way of residential infrastructure: few places to eat, or even to grab a coffee, let alone take a break from art to try on a frock or buy a book.

The massed concentration of galleries is bracing to visitors, for sure, but for a newcomer it is mighty hard to stand out. Viewers move quickly when there is so much to see, and that is bad for both sales and the aesthetic experience alike.

There is a view that Chelsea is a victim of its own success.

In addition, powerful Chelsea galleries bask in the glory of hangar-like spaces, and the great industrial sheds have in turn influenced museum design in the last decade, if not the art shown in them. Again, this is bad news for a gallerist showing emerging artists who work in tight spaces, or for a gallerist trying to sell to new collectors who live in normal accommodation.

A few of the Lower East Side galleries enjoy sumptuous spaces. One of the first in the neighborhood, Canada, founded by artists, has remodeled extensive industrial premises on Chrystie Street, close to Canal. Lehmann Maupin, one of the "art barns" of Chelsea, will be opening a second venue on Chrystie Street later this year. And Salon 94, the gallery run from the Carnegie Hill mansion of Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, has opened a satellite on Freeman Alley designed by architect Rafael Viñoly.

But the typical Lower East Side gallery — in marked contrast to those in Chelsea — is a store, not a shed. You have a sense of art taking its chances amid shoe stores, a bodega, a community center, a restaurant — just another kind of business. Galleries such as Number 35, the only gallery on Essex Street, far south of the fashionable market area, as well as Never Work, on the eastern reaches of Henry Street, near Henry Street Settlement, are boutiques where you could barely swing a cat. They are both run by women who used to work for Chelsea galleries: Number 35's Cindy Rucker at Margaret Thatcher Projects, and Never Work's Siobhan Lowe at Marianne Boesky. The cramped premises of these galleries and of another Lower East Side pioneer, Smith-Stewart on Stanton Street, feel like a liberation of sorts from the cool impersonality of Chelsea. It is very hard for the visitor not to interact with the gallerist, or to get up close and physical with the art.

This might be a novel experience for museumgoers and Chelsea gallery hoppers, but it does recall another, equally specific art-world viewing experience: convention-center booths and hotel rooms, suggesting that where the paradigm of space for art used to be the museum, it is now the fair.

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At the danger of generalizing on scant evidence, the current crop of shows at these galleries bolsters the optimism and idealism that goes with a pioneer spirit. The gallery Sunday, for instance, has a show by the Vermont painter Peter Gallo that fuses wordplay and facture in a rare meeting of the tactile and the cerebral. "Hunger/Nostalgia" (2007) inscribes the words of its title along the cabin and wingspan of an airplane, painted in dabs with a shimmering, exquisitely nervous hand.

There is a similar primitive sophistication to Canada's Michael Williams, a painter of big, goofy works that coyly own up to unexpected nuance and subtlety. While they are close to a number of better-known contemporaries — the diaristic cartoonery recalls Dana Schutz, and the snowy pointillism, Peter Doig — Mr. Williams's humor and craft are deliciously his own. "Cancuned" (2007) has an anthropomorphized Heineken beer bottle drunk on a can of its own brew and sprawled on a veranda, with tropical foliage beyond, and two human onlookers. The richly detailed coloring belies the puerile nature of the image.

The three abstract canvases by Ariel Dill that cram Never Work seem at first either a relic or a pastiche of 1980s abstraction, but gradually show themselves to be in earnest. Each is 60-inches-by-60-inches, and they are all hung on the diagonal, diamond-shaped. "Shutter" (2007) divides the square into triangular quadrants of dark and shade, resembling a camera lens. Predominantly Prussian blue, it contains areas of green and red worked into the surface through sgraffito hatching that recalls expressionist woodcuts.

Rivington Arms, whose co-director, Mirabelle Marden, is the daughter of Brice Marden, has retained the intimacy of its first venue in its new, elegant NoHo town house. Its group show, "Agro Bongo," is of sculpture making near-abstractions out of pristine mass-produced materials: Michael DeLucia's "Untitled (Push Brooms)" (2007), for instance, masses 39 industrial brooms into a corner, in three rows of 13 brooms each, so that their orange bristles form a level square, their handles regimented on the diagonal. Petrova Giberson's "Forget Yellow" (2007) drapes brightly colored synthetic work pants into a kind of relief sculpture. The mood of the show matches the space to a T: refinement with edge, and not a little nostalgia for the playful semiotics of the 1970s avant-garde.

A similar bohemianism of yesteryear is caught by Karin Schneider in her installation "Image Coming Soon." Ms. Schneider was formerly a technician at Anthology Film Archives, the East Village landmark that preserves and promotes experimental film. She is now a shareholder in the artist-run gallery Orchard, which occupies a dark, narrow store left in a deliberately raw state. For her show she constructed an open shelf along the middle of the gallery, encased by rough sheets of Plexiglas, within which are openings for an array of vintage projecting and editing devices, including a 16mm projector. The projector screens onto a section of a canvas depicting a Moviola editing machine, which fits exactly to the painted screen. The six-minute film was shot at the artist's request by another artist, Amy Granat, who records a visit to le Corbusier's Villa Savoye outside Paris. The film was then painted on by the artist, and deliberately scratched in its initial projections. The result is strangely affecting, despite the deliberateness of its throwback self-referentiality, a cool mix of intentionality and random effects.

Visitors to Orchard should expect the unexpected, as the gallery has an unpublished schedule of performances by bands and experimental sound artists. The policy is indicative of a playful bohemianism, recalling the Happenings of the 1950s and '60s. Such spontaneity epitomizes a Lower East Side spirit that is unlikely to survive if the district cascades into a second Chelsea. Let's revel in it while we can.

Peter Gallo (Until December 9, 237 Eldridge St., 212-253-0700); Michael Williams (Until November 18, 55 Chrystie St., 212-925-4631);

Ariel Dill (Until November 18, 191 Henry St., 212-228-9206);

Rivington Arms group show (Until November 20, 4 E. 2nd St., 646-654-3213),

Karin Schneider (Until November 11, 47 Orchard St., 212-219-1061).