

ART

Three Ladies of Chill Repute

JANUARY 30, 2012 BY SARAH SCHMERLER



Deborah Brown, Sarah Schmerler, and Gwendolyn Skaggs, curators of recent shows in Bushwick, stand in front of an abstract street mural on the corner of Bogart and Varet streets.
© Photo by Allen Yi ng

Why art galleries in Bushwick don't recognize the Generational Divide

Want a formula for getting your (totally deserving, yet under-

appreciated) artwork out of your studio and into a larger context? Want to join that invisible art world phenomenon called “The Dialogue”? Find yourself a middle-aged lady who curates. Sorry to be so blunt, but it’s true. My own statistical research has proved it. When women with two plus decades of experience in the New York art scene are given free reign to curate in places like Bushwick (see below), they cut boldly across styles, typologies, and generations. They know for a fact what’s going to be the next hot thing. Why? Because they’ve seen it all before. And just maybe, it’s you.

To prove this incredibly scientific theory, I conducted an experiment. On January 8, 2012, I invited two women art impresarios of Bushwick—Deborah Brown and Gwendolyn Skaggs—to participate in a three-way, round robin series of interviews and gallery visits. (My own curatorial turn, “Guilty / (NOT) Guilty,” which included four artists, plus two extra projects, had opened the week before at Wyckoff Avenue’s Norte Maar.) I said, “Let’s all visit each other’s shows, and respond to them?” This is the result.

JAN 8. 12:30 PM

Sarah visits Deborah Brown, proprietor of Storefront Bushwick (in business as Storefront since 2010). Deborah responds:

Can you tell us a little about how you, a working artist with a dedicated studio practice, got into curating and starting a gallery? Artists run 99% of the galleries in Bushwick, so what I do is not so unusual! I got on the path to opening Storefront Bushwick in 2006 when I bought a vacant factory building on Stockholm Street to use as my studio. I became friends with curator and neighborhood arts activist Jason Andrew, who was interested in showing my paintings of Bushwick, possibly in a pop-up space. I had the idea to open a gallery and approached Jason about renting a space for a year, and curating shows for it together. I found the space at 16 Wilson Avenue on craigslist, and we opened Storefront on January 2, 2010, with “New Year, New Space, New Work.” Our first opening was absolutely mobbed, and

I knew we were onto something. After two plus years, I now direct the gallery, but still approach it as the artist that I am, running it as an aspect of my artistic practice.

Name some of the ways you've discovered artists outside your ken, whom you might not normally or otherwise have discovered.

People think you consult the entire universe of artists when you curate shows, but in fact all curators organize shows from the universe they already inhabit. I, too, use my circle, but it's a pretty big one because I've lived in New York since 1982. I was in a discussion group for women artists (aka "The Girl Group") and an artists' philosophy reading group during the 90s. Some of the artists I have shown at the gallery date from those years, when I met many people whose practice was very different from mine. I have shown Drew Shiflett, Elana Herzog, Mary Jones, Theresa Hackett...the list goes on. I also show artists whose work I found by traveling around Bushwick and seeing shows in the neighborhood. I found Halsey Hathaway in a show at Small Black Door Gallery, an artist-run basement space in Ridgewood, Queens. That's where I also found Martin Bromirski and Matthew Mahler, whose work I'll be showing in the coming year. These discoveries are essentially "word of mouth" in that they come from visiting artist-run spaces that present work by artists with studios in the neighborhood. I found Cathy Quinlan through Sharon Butler's blog, "Two Coats of Paint." I read Paddy Johnson, Hrag Vartanian, Josh Abelow, Martin Bromirski, and others to learn about artists. Often I get ideas from seeing work donated by artists for benefits, like those for NURTUREart and Momenta, on whose boards I serve. I truly feel that benefits create opportunities for artists to have their work seen by people who are in a position to help them.

What are some ways artists can "take the reins" in their own careers? I'm an example of how an artist might do this. I opened a gallery and now have a platform to express my ideas about what should be seen. I already had representation (Lesley Heller Workspace on the Lower East Side) when I opened the

gallery, but having Storefront Bushwick broadened that platform.

Artists can take the reins by organizing their own shows, whether it's in a pop-up space or in a one-night-only event in their studios. Participate in events like Bushwick Open Studios, go to openings at galleries and artist-run spaces in the neighborhood, collaborate with other artists—these are ways you can help yourself. If you stay exclusively in your studio, waiting for fame to strike, chances are it won't.

Can you give some examples of artists—and their venues—who are doing just that? Small Black Door Gallery in Ridgewood, run by Matthew Mahler and Jonathan Terranova; and P.A.C., run by Denise Kupferchmidt and Gina Beavers above Public Assembly in Williamsburg. Artist Lynn Sullivan curated a one-night group show at her studio on St. Nicholas Avenue last fall. Through that show, I found Casey Ruble, whose work I will be showing in a group show in July. As I mentioned before, all the galleries are artist run: Factory Fresh, Famous Accountants, Regina Rex, Centotto, Sugar Bushwick, Airplane, Outpost Artists Resources, Small Black Door, Sardine, Microscope, Valentine, The Active Space, Botanic, and Pocket Utopia (now closed). Even the galleries located at 56 Bogart Street, in what I think of as “the new Bushwick,” are run by artists: Bogart Salon, Agape, and Interstate Projects. English Kills Gallery is not run by an artist, but it is a kind of performance piece by Chris Harding!

What's the result of all that, and how might it affect the art world in the future? The commercial gallery system is what it is, and it isn't going to change. What we are doing in Bushwick is creating an alternative universe like the Bizarro World in *Superman* comics. Sometimes it feels like we are on our own, but sometimes we intersect with the commercial art world. Our Justen Ladda show was reviewed in *The New York Times*, the first gallery in Bushwick to receive a *Times* review. The commercial gallery world gets its ideas from Bushwick and from places like ours—the artist communities where new work surfaces. Artists always know the most interesting artists first, and we frequently make good

curators.

The other day we were discussing how important it is for people working in the creative arts to fight discouragement. How can artists do this? And how might we as “professionals” help in that? Being an artist can be tough. My husband observed that it’s a lot easier to be a gallery than it is to be an artist. As an artist who directs a gallery, I try to create as many opportunities for other artists as I can. As an artist, I know that egos get bruised easily and that there is a lot of rejection that comes with the territory. Artists can fight discouragement by creating opportunities for themselves, by allying themselves with other artists in their community, and by working together to achieve recognition.

How has the Bushwick scene been shifting? Where might you want to take it, if you had the say? The beginning of the old Bushwick art scene is over. We are now in the next phase, where we are joined by not-for-profit, alternative spaces like Momena and NURTUREart, and by commercial galleries like Lühring Augustine. Some of the pioneering artist-run spaces have closed or will close. The mix is different than it was five years ago, and there are more players. What’s to come? Who knows? What I find remarkable is that, in my thirty plus years in New York, I have never seen commercial galleries open spaces this far out of Manhattan. We are the cool kids now, and the larger art world is paying attention. As long as artists retain some of the platforms for the display of their work, we will influence the dialogue in Bushwick and in the larger art world. It is imperative that we be part of the mix of voices as Bushwick’s art scene evolves, or this community will lose something very special. It’s been my good luck to be part of it, and I am not giving up easily.

JAN 8. 1:40 PM

Deborah visits Gwendolyn Skaggs, curator and owner of Sugar, a curatorial project that began with “Alcove,” in Chelsea, in the winter of 2006 and has been housed in Bushwick since 2009.

Gwendolyn responds:

How did you start doing what you're doing now? Through circumstance, I stopped making objects. When I was making artwork I brought together objects, manipulating them, working with spatial arrangements; in that process I was focusing on—and finding—equilibrium and learning the magic of implication. The end result (at that time) was installation art and mobiles. Sugar is now, overall, an installation. I approach it as a work of art. I seek out an artwork, look for another artwork that will “unbalance” it, or tweak it, find another artwork that will pull those two works in another direction, and so on. I’m more interested in the pushes and pulls.

Whom do you admire as a curator? Most are too academic for me to admire. However, I have recently gotten interested in Rudi Fuchs; I dig his approach to curating. I like this snippet I read on Artnet.com by Abigail R. Esman: “To view a Fuchs show right is to take a leap of faith, to trust that what appears to have no sense is rich with reason...”

Whose work organizing shows has inspired you the most? Recently, artist Fred Wilson—and not so much inspired, as encouraged. I find inspiration elsewhere: Phillipe Petit, the high-wire artist; Alex Honnold, the free-solo climber; Judith Scott, also an artist.

What was a favorite moment or learning moment you had as a show impresario? When I have worked through something that was difficult, pushed my boundaries, and set new limits for ideas.

What's a hard thing about hanging other people's work that artists, and others, should know? It's just like working on a painting, in a way; some things get worked out for the better, along the way, and there are great happenstances. The more difficult, the better. I have an art handling background, with extensive knowledge of art preservation/framing. At Sugar, I am the preparator. Hanging work is not hard for me. The hardest

thing for me is asking for help. Most of all: handle with care.

What would you change, if anything, about how contemporary art is displayed for the public? Legalize street art.

JAN 8. 3 PM

Gwendolyn visits the show curated by Sarah Schmerler's show "Guilty / (NOT) Guilty," at Norte Maar, and writes:

My name is Gwendolyn Skaggs, outsider artist and founder and creator of Sugar. I'm an admirer of intuition, and I was asked by Sarah to give my impressions of "Guilty / (NOT) Guilty" at Norte Maar.

It was late afternoon when Sarah first walked me through the exhibit, citing references both personal and art historical that the artists were making. Meanwhile, I took in the work—the actual imagery, techniques, and determination the artists have. I found my eyes moving back and forth as if I were witnessing a tennis match, listening and watching her and returning to the "impressions" on the wall. Then, the sunset hit the work of Pablo Tauler. The shadows emphasized what I saw in his pieces—how I interpreted it. I interrupted Sarah's explanations and grabbed my camera. Within seconds a blank canvas appeared next to Pablo's "The house I grew up in, my dog always by my side, lazy summer days," full of light particles. Timing is everything and I'm a fan of happenstance. I think there's a lot of it in this show.

My visit is supposed to be an interview, or was, but I can't think of too many questions to ask Sarah, because I think I know what she is doing with the guilty not guilty business. The layers of art history, her history of writing, conceptualizing, and debating, between her intellect and gut, and a wee bit of her heart. Inside my head I am gleeful, and tickled by the challenges taken and boundaries pushed. Appropriating, copying, experimenting—all are acts of play, and great things often spawn from playing. Though a diverse collection, each artwork relates harmoniously

with Sarah's internal vision.

SARAH RESPONDS: That “wee bit of heart” comment is really wrenching for me, Gwendolyn. You are so right; I must try to put more heart in my shows in future. That said, I put it in the Project Room. The two photos there are images of 27-year-old artist Wade Schaming's mom, who is struggling with dementia. There aren't any easy answers in those images. I hung them knowing full well that every time I looked at them, I would have to think about my own mom, who passed away a year-and-a-half ago—from dementia—and say to myself, “but this is not that.”

GWENDOLYN ADDS: I remembered this, and that's the “wee bit” I was referring to, the Project Room, though a little tucked away. You gave us a little bit of your heart. That photograph I took of Paulius' iPad [Berlin-based Paulius Nosokas has videos on display in the Project Room]: while his video “Light+Time=Form” was running, the iPad held the reflection of Wade's “Mom and Storage Shed.” It seemed apropos to me, that moment. The reflection put her in another place, another dimension, not accessible to us, or anyone.

SARAH: Thanks. Before you even wrote this I was going to tell you that I think it's possible, as a curator, to make choices that are well thought out without necessarily being linear or programmatic. In this respect I've been very influenced by the radical art historian Aby Warburg, who died in 1929 (Luis Perez-Oramas of MoMA turned me on to him). Also by Hudson, of Feature gallery, who makes idiosyncratic yet totally trackable decisions in what he chooses to hang. By writing about art, I've gotten to work both sides of the fence, and find that, well, there isn't one.

John Szarkowski once said that the act of photographing is essentially one of pointing, of saying, “hey, look at THIS.” It's an over simplification to say that that's what I did with this show. Yet it's true. I also had to face things I might not otherwise like to look at in myself in the “pointing” process. You said, while we were standing in the show, that you run from the word “curator” like

dodging a bullet, and I couldn't agree more. Somebody ought to help us find a better word, since we're both convinced that there's more art in curating than "simply academics" or "craft." Let's consider that an open call.

Sugar 449 Troutman Street

Norte Marr 83 Wyckoff Avenue

Storefront Bushwick 16 Wilson Avenue

45Projects is a virtual exhibition space run by Berlin-based artist Paulius Nosokas and Sarah Schmerler. It is located at www.45projects.com <<http://www.45projects.com>>.

« Buddhist Jill Satterfield Dispatches a Message from a Monastery in England

OP/ED A 21st Century Manhattan Project, Williamsburg Version »
