

FORT GANSEVOORT

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Galleries Shift Shape to Survive in a Changing Art World

By ROBERTA SMITH JUNE 23, 2016

Art galleries, like museums, are in a state of flux, determined to find ways to survive and remain relevant in an increasingly hostile environment shaped by rising rents; development; absurd auction prices and a dearth of old-school collectors — ones who think for themselves.

The few that can are shape-shifting and scaling up, becoming more like museums, mounting shows with outside curators and even opening their own bookstores. Many galleries stage not only art performances — by now routine — but also panel discussions and conversations with the artists whose work they sell. As might be expected, these can blur the line between public service and promotion.

The word hybrid, referring to a museum-inclined commercial art gallery, was heard more than once in Los Angeles at the opening of the imposing arts complex that is Hauser Wirth & Schimmel. Its four buildings surround a large, street-accessible courtyard (with a 150-seat restaurant planned for September) that most museums would envy. (Amenities is another word you'll hear.) Perhaps most telling, the gallery has a full-time staff member in charge of educational programs.

In the opposite direction, smaller galleries, especially in New York, are dispersing beyond established art neighborhoods like Chelsea, Bushwick and the

Upper and Lower East Side, to far-flung locations, exploiting New York's extensive subway system.

GAVIN BROWN'S ENTERPRISE Occasionally a gallery manages to do both, to become a bit more like a museum — or at least an alternative space — while avoiding gallery enclaves. Gavin Brown's enterprise has evaded blue-chip status partly by deliberately favoring the margins (of SoHo, then Chelsea and most recently Greenwich Village) and partly by watching its biggest discoveries (Chris Ofili, Peter Doig, Piotr Uklanski) go off to larger operations. Mr. Brown, a British artist who relocated to New York in 1988 and opened his first gallery in 1994, was ahead of the amenities curve. His second gallery, on West 15th Street, included Passerby, a small fully functioning bar with a disco floor by Mr. Uklanski.

Mr. Brown now has an outpost smack in the middle of the Lower East Side, but his new flagship gallery is in a four-story building at 439 West 127th Street in Harlem that is something of a mini Dia Art Foundation.

The opening show is the New York commercial gallery debut of the brilliant British video artist Ed Atkins, whose enigmatic digital animations create complex inner lives for figures more usual to video games. Mr. Atkins has installed a piece on each of the building's three display floors. All involve double or triple projections that create a strong spatial experience, as do cutting-edge sound effects alternating with well-chosen musical accompaniment. And all feature a tormented, disheveled man loosely based on Mr. Atkins — or at least using his voice and (captured) facial expressions.

Tending toward a vivid grimness and a certain macho angst, these animations meditate on the alienating effects of technology, terrorism, modern travel and good old self-abnegation. In "Hisser," our hero is sucked out of his bedroom to wander, naked on the white screen, muttering to himself. In the elaborate "Ribbons," he is heavily tattooed and spends most of his time slumped over a pub table. The shortest piece is probably best: the nine-minute "Safe Conduct," seen in the sky-lighted fourth floor space. Bins of human organs and body parts pass through a T.S.A. checkpoint while our protagonist watches. In baggage claim, he poses like a hostage and is finally seen in close-up gritting his teeth to the mounting, increasingly

militant strains of Ravel's Bolero. Thus is existential dread updated and digital animation given unusual gravity.

Mr. Brown's example of persistence and unpredictability is inspiring but also hard to match. Here are some other show places that are breaking the mold in their own ways.

FORT GANSEVOORT Although it's just a block from the new Whitney Museum in the meatpacking district, Fort Gansevoort is also off the beaten gallery path. It occupies a Greek Revival house at 5 Ninth Avenue (near Little West 12th Street) that was previously a restaurant and was recently taken over by Adam Shopkorn, a person of diverse interests. They include fashion, craft and barbecue. But Mr. Shopkorn is also drawn to odd bits of recent art history. He is currently showing the abstract paintings of Richard Landry, known as Dickie, a prominent musician and photographer who figured in Food, the artist-run restaurant in early '70s in SoHo, and was a member of the original Philip Glass Ensemble (saxophone). In the mid-70s, Mr. Landry began making abstract paintings in a style that has continued. Their hard-edge geometrics and textured surfaces suggest flattened Minimalist boxes. They aren't especially original, but they are forceful, tough-minded period pieces, and good to see.

STEVEN HARVEY FINE ART PROJECTS On the northern edge of the Lower East Side, at 208 Forsyth Street (near East Houston), the tiny Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects is not so much geographically as aesthetically marginal. Mr. Harvey, a longtime art adviser, independent curator and dealer who favors a strong tactility is resurrecting the old-fashioned pictures gallery and making it hip. "Freetime, Part 1," his current group show of six mostly young artists, perfectly represents his sensibility. Four repurpose the seductive hues and open gestures of Color Field Painting, whether in the beautiful ceramic bowls of Beth Kaminstein, the painted hooked-rug tapestries of Liv Aanrud, the quasi-abstract still lifes of Daniel Herr or the vaguely Symbolist pastels of Paul Metrisko. The sturdy figurative paintings of Giordanne Salley and Anna Mendes more than hold their own.

106 GREEN Occupying the living room of a ground-floor apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and open only on Sundays, 106 Green (actually at 104 Green

Street), near Franklin Street, is perched just north of the Williamsburg gallery scene. It was founded four years ago by the artists Mitchell Wright, Ridley Howard and Holly Coulis who recently appointed as its director Jon Lutz, an independent curator. Mr. Lutz has organized a wry group show, “Maybe I’m Doing It Wrong,” knitting it with strands of self-doubt. Ryan Falkowitz makes a monthly picture calendar that is twice wrong: The image of Rodney Dangerfield is fake, and it is used for all 12 months. Elizabeth Bonaventura offers a wonderful graphite drawing of a worried-looking Eskimo hunter in a kayak, while Sara Greenberger Rafferty plies the ambiguous line between object and photograph, most effectively in “Body Suit With Tie.” Stacy Fisher makes formally succinct yet ambiguous sculptures that borrow credibly from Bruce Nauman and Louise Bourgeois. Allison Evans adapts Sumi ink painting to depict the often mixed signals endemic to growing up female. Everything stands out here, but most of all Justin Q. Martin’s large work in sewn and painted brown wool that floats before the wall on a delicate wire infrastructure, conjuring an eccentric hand puppet or mask.

THE KNOCKDOWN CENTER This refurbished 19th-century brick factory compound at 52-19 Flushing Avenue (at 54th Street) in Maspeth, Queens, initially produced glass and then prefab, or knockdown, doors. Now, four years old, it is its own kind of strange hybrid. Overseen by the artists Michael Merck and Tyler Myers, it survives by renting parts of its 60,000 square feet for weddings, performances and other events. But along with Vanessa Thill, the two also oversee noncommercial art exhibitions. The best of the three current shows is “Transactions,” organized by Carolina Wheat and Liz Nielsen, who run Elijah Wheat Showroom, a small Bushwick space. They invited artists to contribute a favorite object and explain its importance. Nearly two dozen responded, including Carol Bove, Lisa Yuskavage and Yevgeniya Baras, and their often telling selections hang above little rugs and pillows that invite intimate contemplation. One of the most tangible effects of this barely-visible show is the hand-drawn map by Mr. Merck. In the courtyard, the capable sculptures and paintings of John Furgason, Serban Ionescu and Carlos Little all gain from being displayed in a romantic ruined boiler. A two-person show introduces the work of Anna Mikhailovskaia, a promising young Brooklyn sculptor, and John Schacht (1938-2009), a little-known Chicagoan, whose watercolor-gouaches of patterned

biomorphic forms expand the legacy of the Hairy Who. The Knockdown Center brims with unrealized potential. It already has a restaurant.

TOPLESS The outlier of all outliers here is Topless, billed as “a seasonal art gallery” at 91-02 Rockaway Beach Boulevard (at 91st Street). Now in its third year, Topless is wrest to life each summer by its co-founders and co-directors, Jenni Crain, who works full-time in a Chelsea gallery, and Brent Birnbaum, an artist who lives in the Rockaways. They stage four three-week shows in a rented, quickly refurbished space from mid-June to the end of August. This year’s initial offering centers on Beverly Semmes’s playfully regal installation: a pathway of large squares of gold velvet adorned with long-sleeve-like loops of dark blue and green velvet, as if flung by a passing Isadora Duncan. The piece is paired with the finely miniaturist, sometimes gold-leafed paintings of families and gardens by Larissa Bates. In plain sight of the summering Rockaways, these works form a separate realm that intimates riches and rituals both ancient and new.

Bless the New York subway system.

Correction: June 23, 2016

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of a gallery on the Lower East Side. It is Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, not Steven Henry Fine Art Projects. (The error was repeated in a picture caption.)

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