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UNTIL RECENTLY, A DICKINSON TYPE IN Downtown's Arts District could have stayed happily indoors—with no galleries or bistros to tempt her. But today my still-gritty neighborhood houses lofts and restaurants like R23, whose exceptional Japanese food has drawn locals and adventurous West Siders since 1991.

Like those in New York City's SoHo, the district's vacant warehouses were colonized by artists in the 1970's, but as the area gentrified, rents rose—sending artists to newer urban frontiers like Boyle Heights. MOCA's Temporary Contemporary took up residence in nearby Little Tokyo in 1983. It is now permanently the David Geffen Contemporary. Some remaining battered buildings in the city's historic core are its newest places to view art—pulling the Chinatown art crowd to 44 galleries, mostly on Main and Spring Streets, which were dubbed Gallery Row by the city in 2003. The Downtown Art Walk draws about 4,000 people, ranging from artists to West L.A. collectors.

One of the most collectible artists is a pioneer of an industrial section of Boyle Heights, across the Los Angeles River: thirtysomething painter Amy Bessone, whose work has been bought by MOCA. Bessone is best known for her large-scale paintings of Meissen porcelain figurines rendered as if they were alive. “There is a strange moment in the porcelains where German folklore meets Disney,” she told me. Of the new work in her studio, she said, “The last porcelains I painted were close-ups of faces. Their surfaces were very masklike, which drew me to painting masks themselves.”