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ART An Upeat Moment for a Downtrodden Area



Oscar Hidalgo for The New York Times

A visitor to Salon 94 Freemans looks at Aida Ruilova's video piece, "Lulu." More Photos >

By HOLLAND COTTER Published: December 1, 2007

The inaugural festivities of the new New Museum of Contemporary Art kick off today at noon and continue for a celebratory 30 admission-free hours. Just east and south of the museum's Bowery site, some two dozen galleries, many of them recent arrivals, are open for business.

Multimedia



Slide Show Galleries Hit the Lower East Side

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This is an upbeat moment for a part of town that has seen its share of hard times, and lots of people are cheering. But at least a few have a more skeptical take: Here comes the art, there goes the neighborhood.

Actually, this has been the situation since the East Village art boom of the 1980s, the last time Manhattan had anything like an alternative art universe, a neighborhood where artists and dealers — themselves often artists — lived, worked, showed, shopped and danced at night. But once art made the neighborhood chic, limousines were idling outside the storefront galleries. Real estate soared. Artists moved.

The Lower East Side just south of the East Village —

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Movie poster for 'Beginners' featuring Ewan McGregor, Christopher Plummer, and Mélanie Laurent. Text: 'Beginners THIS IS WHAT LOVE FEELS LIKE NOW PLAYING IN SELECT THEATRES'

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roughly between Houston and Canal Streets east of Bowery — remained a bargain for a while and kept its Latino-Chinese-punk cultural mix. Galleries came and went; a few exhibition spaces — ABC No Rio, Gallery 128, the Asian American Arts Center, the Henry Street Settlement, the Educational Alliance — are still there. But this was never a gallery-intensive scene.

Things are changing fast. In the last few years several new galleries have put down roots. Canada, Cucchifritos, FusionArts, Participant Inc., Reena Spaulings and Rivington Arms led the way, later joined by Miguel Abreu Gallery and the artist-run Orchard; more recently James Fuentes, Fruit and Flower Deli, Smith-Stewart, Sunday, Eleven Rivington and Thierry Goldberg have opened.

In addition, there are some transplants: Janos Gat and Luxe have moved down from the Upper East Side, 31 Grand from Williamsburg and Envoy from Chelsea, with Feature coming in January. And satellite spaces are popping up: Lehman Maupin (Chelsea), Greenberg Van Doren (57th Street), Salon 94 (Upper East Side) and Museum 52 (London) have all opened Lower East Side extensions.

Of the new crop, the start-ups are by far the most interesting. James Fuentes LLC is slightly below Canal Street in Chinatown, in a part of town remote enough to have kept traces of the past. One of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in the United States is here, as is the Roman Catholic church for which the street, St. James Place, was named. The young Mr. Fuentes, who operates out of a wedge-shaped storefront, grew up in the area, and the art he favors smacks of the street, and of the post-punk music scene identified with the Lower East Side.

The artist on view now, Lizzi Bougatsos, is a member of the band Gang Gang Dance. The tentlike sculpture in her solo show was inspired by an encounter with a homeless person who made birdhouses. Her piece, assembled from found bits of cloth and cardboard, was conceived as a human-size version. Mr. Fuentes has ambitious plans for projects that will extend into the Lower East Side and relate to its history and character. For starters he has produced an excellent art map of the area, available at his gallery, with both existing and vanished galleries noted, perfect for an in-depth tour.

The scavenging punk spirit of Ms. Bougatsos’s work is shared, with certain refinements, by the artist Peter Gallo, who lives in rural Vermont and has an excellent show at Sunday. A collagist and draftsman of considerable invention, Mr. Gallo is also an art critic and historian, a psychiatric social worker and a wide-ranging reader and music lover, all of which comes through in intensely referential work that embraces Freud, Roland Barthes, Dusty Springfield, gay pornography and ornithology.

Mr. Gallo’s art has an insider-outsider look that can, in other hands, turn precious and generic, but he makes it work. I lingered over each piece, and if I had to choose a favorite artist from my tour, he would certainly be on the shortlist.

If I had to name a favorite gallery, the choice is clear: Fruit and Flower Deli, which feels like a work of art in itself thanks to its carefully stage-managed image. The gallery’s press material says it is an emanation of a goddess-muse named Snofrid, otherwise known as the Oracle, who is embodied in a painting of a mirror by Ylva Ogland, a Swedish artist represented by the Smith-Stewart gallery next door.



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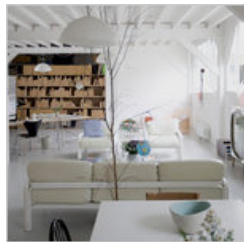
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