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ART REVIEW

The Latest Vibe Moved to Brooklyn

By Holland Cotter

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For artists New York City has always had unaffordable neighborhoods. Now it has an unaffordable borough, Manhattan. There, in the past, blue-collar areas like Greenwich Village, SoHo and the Lower East Side offered cheap living for the no-collar day-jobbers that most artists were and still are. Rents were such that they could make their work upstairs and show it downstairs.

Art was a cottage industry.

Then came the 2000s and money and Chelsea, which is the equivalent of a suburban mall: a business district, a consumer zone.

A few artists went there to show; most went to look and then go home. Increasingly, in the past decade, home has been Brooklyn, starting with Williamsburg, then moving outward ahead of the real-estate cash tide. For a while now the buck has stopped at Bushwick, a scrappy, ethnically manifold, postindustrial jumble of a place abutting onto Queens. At street level it's mostly bodegas, fast-food shops and auto repairs. But artists are there, lots of them.

For the sixth annual Bushwick Open Studios celebration last weekend, more than 500 artists made their work spaces, which were often also their living spaces, accessible to anyone who wanted to look. Others exhibited in the area's two dozen or so galleries. Still others displayed their wares at Bushwick Basel, a miniature art fair housed in the studio and sometime alternative space belonging to Jules de Balincourt, a Bushwick painter with an international reputation. When you tote up the numbers, and factor in the local talent too shy or unready to show, you're talking serious art-population density, so serious that Bushwick can really no longer be considered a buzzy frontier. As if in proof of a budding mainstream status, a major Chelsea gallery, Luhring Augustine, recently established an outpost here, and a very Chelsea place it is: blank and thick walled, like a bank vault.

But what does frontier mean anyway? Does it — should it — mean something about the kind of art being produced? It meant that in SoHo in the 1960s and '70s, with the emergence of new media (video, installation, sound art), and in the East Village of the 1980s, which could claim an apocalyptically minded post-punk aesthetic, not to mention Neo-Geo.

But since then art has professionalized and industrialized. Schools pump out artists; artists pump out vast amounts of art. The market, as embodied in art fairs, has become a bulk operation, favoring the smooth-selling tried and true — painting, sculpture — over experiment. An ancient avant-garde model of the artist as creature of high ideals, messy habits and no expectations has been revised to accommodate competitiveness, personal polish and an agenda for professional success.

ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

To what degree those elements shape artists' lives in Bushwick today I can't say. More than once during a recent gallery and studio walkabout I had the sensation of being in a giant M.F.A. graduate show, with all the cautious, self-conscious formalism and too-tight ideas that implies. At the same time, the general atmosphere was school-like in a good, utopian way: people working side by side, artists enjoying other artists, Manhattan a mere mirage in the wide Bushwick sky.

Seeing art in the neighborhood, though, requires some effort. Bushwick is big; galleries are spread here and there, spilling over into Ridgewood, Queens. One way to organize a tour is around a couple of L line subway stops, each near different gallery clusters.

Jefferson Street L Train Stop

The Jefferson Street stop is the jumping-off point for another set of galleries, which are fewer and farther apart. The Active Space, in a former factory, is a white box with hardwood floors, like SoHo of yesteryear. Large, brushy paintings by Deborah Brown, each a kind of sci-fi image of Bushwick's salvage yards and low-rise shops, look great here.

A salute by this mid-career artist to her home turf, the show is also a tribute by the gallery to Ms. Brown, who runs Storefront Bushwick and has worked hard for years to make the neighborhood welcoming to new art.

Along with a couple of galleries the Active Space building houses a number of rentable studios in a pattern repeated elsewhere. In former factories on Troutman Street, galleries like Sugar at 449 and Regina Rex, at 1717, are embedded in studio environments, creating a mixed-use model that, again, recalls 1970s SoHo, where making, exhibiting and selling of work were all, to some degree, controlled by artists.