

The wild west of NYC's galleries

By Shane McAdams

Like most, I often end up taking the path of least resistance on a Saturday afternoon when I get the art itch. Invariably, I exit the Whitney or the Met wondering why I didn't embark on a more ambitious art excursion. MoMa's fine, but it's always there. And, let's face it, slaking your thirst for art at a museum on a Saturday can be as quenching as waiting in line to be sprayed in the face by a fire hose. But somehow we're comforted by knowing where they're doing the hosing.

The reason you've probably never been to Participant Inc., Canada, Sunday, James Fuentes LLC, or any of the dozens of great low-profile venues on the Lower East Side, is because it's more of a sprawling wetlands than a watering hole. If an efficient art hop is what you're after, the Lower East Side isn't your thing; it takes detective and legwork to appreciate. Beyond being decentralized, the galleries downtown tend to keep a low profile. They don't collaborate to produce guide books and maps and they don't operate out of palatial galleries with frosted glass storefronts beckoning weekenders to come in and do figure eights before leaving twenty seconds later. They cater to a more discriminating gallery goer who plans on sticking around for a while.

Additionally, the Lower East Side and downtown community of art spaces seem to evolve faster than taxonomy can keep up. Galleries have always come and gone with the whims and bankrolls of their proprietors, but the L.E.S. spaces have a particularly day-by-day feel that gives them a unique vitality — it's the Wild West to Chelsea's rodeo. Most of these downtown holes-in-the-wall began as labors of love, often by artists, without the war chests, armies of employees, and histories of Chelsea's stalwarts, and because of this, or in spite of it, their programming has steered clear of the merchandizing flavor of its cross-town, blue-chip counterparts. As a result, the shows downtown are intimate, sophisticated, and usually well worth the tortuous path you'll beat around the lower half of Manhattan to find them.

Next time the urge hits you, take the F train to 2nd Avenue and head first to Sunday at 237 Eldridge Street. The gallery attendant who will greet you will also be its owner, director, installer, designer and window washer, C. Sean Horton, an avuncular, bearded art junkie who loves vintage country western music and Dr. Pepper. Horton literally built the interior of Sunday with his own hands. An artist himself, his keen eye has been honed from inside the studio, and it shows. In its first several months, the gallery has mounted a string of impressive exhibitions including Ed Blackburn's biblically inspired paintings and Gayleen Aiken's diaristic crayon and pen reflections on her native Vermont community.

Rivington Street a few blocks south has become the de-facto hub of the L.E.S. art district, even though its highest profile space, Rivington Arms, originally located at 102 Rivington, recently moved to 2nd Avenue. It still has its draws though. The convention-defying non-profit, Participant Inc., run by the incomparable Lia Gangitano, has made a routine of putting on inventive cross-disciplinary, often collaborative projects at its space at 95 Rivington for the past six years, and continues to make waves that crash beyond Delancey. Close by, a venerable mainstay that's been in the area for over two decades, Gallery 128, has infused the scene with a dash of august wisdom. Other upstarts and recent departures speak to the instability of the L.E.S. art community. The former Brooklyn favorite, SixtySeven, dabbled with Chelsea for a couple seasons and has recently relocated to 5 Rivington, working now as Thierry Goldberg Projects. SixtySeven moved from 27th Street under the assumption that it's better to stand out on the L.E.S. than to be one of hundreds in the art malls of Chelsea. Time will tell, but for now things are looking up.

As SixtySeven was moving in, they might have seen the settling dust from the recent departures of the Bond Gallery and Rostaing/Steinitz who occupied nearby spaces on Rivington. Another shooting star, Silo, has temporarily closed its doors as it looks for a new location. Rumors are that Salon 94 might be moving

from the Upper East Side to occupy the vacancy. Canada moved from Tribeca in the annex of Leo Koenig's old spot to a more-secluded den above a restaurant at 55 Chrystie Street. Their creative program was born from the sensibilities of artists Phil Grauer along with Wallace Whitney and Sarah Braman. It's yet another gallery that has resisted the trappings of traditional success that has lured galleries toward commercial centers and museum-like spaces. Their work is often more universally digestible (this is relative, remember) than some of the others in the area, showing a lot of abstract painting and quirky, perhaps visionary drawing. Recent shows of abstract work by Carrie Moyer and Xylor Jane stand out as brilliant examples of how Canada's young painters are capitalizing successfully on established modes of flat art while other galleries have been wont to look toward the 3rd and 4th dimensions for new frontiers.

Last Year's Whitney Biennial cast a spotlight on Reena Spaulings that, paradoxically, illuminated few as to what it/they actually were. "Day for Night," the first-ever themed biennial at the Whitney, focused on work that disrupted the notion of artistic authorship and legitimacy, and seemed to be winking at the Lower East Side and Reena Spaulings the whole time. A virtual metaphor for the irresolution and transitory nature of the scene, Reena Spaulings is a pseudonym for the artists John Kelsey and Emily Sundblad who frustrated art world accountants by producing art work and texts under the signature of a fictional entity while simultaneously putting on shows as a legitimate gallery. I've known more than a few people who avoided the gallery, fearing that the whole project was some kind of an inside joke — which is not really so far off. As if it wasn't difficult enough to get a handle on their program, Reena Spaulings didn't even leave a trail of breadcrumbs when they suddenly moved from their space on Grand Street to their current residence at 165 East Broadway.

On Canal Street, dealer Michele MacCarone raised eyebrows several years ago by maintaining a two-floor space amidst considerable attention from the mainstream art world. Showing difficult projects rather than object-driven art, she suddenly shut her doors only to reemerge at art fairs and, recently, in a new Greenwich Village space. Like an opportunistic hermit crab, L.A.-based impresario Javier Peres, in tandem with the much-publicized artist Terence Koh, filled the vacant shell at 45 Canal, opening Asia Song Society, and planning a series of challenging projects that will undoubtedly draw attention. On the outskirts of Chinatown at 35 St. James Pl., former Deitch Projects Director James Fuentes recently opened his eponymous gallery James Fuentes LLC. Unless you're a Chinese American, a very lost tourist looking for cheap watches, or trying to buy a Mogwai, it's unlikely that you'd stumble across it. His first few shows in the space have been well received and it's safe to say that his program will keep its edge and remain isolated from the madding crowds for now. But those crowds might be coming soon. The New Museum will open on the Bowery by the year's end, and while it should provide a docking point for the public, it also has the potential to influence what is happening nearby. The new four-story ultra-slick building, designed by Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa of the Tokyo-based firm Sanaa, will cast a handsome shadow of legitimacy over the downtown art scene. Hopefully the scramble for spaces in its shade will keep them sharp.

There are dozens more overlooked galleries and non-profit spaces spread out across the area that deserve attention, but I shouldn't give everything away. Part of the allure of the downtown art scene is that it's somewhat unprocessed. But here are a few more just to whet your appetite: Miguel Abreu, Henry Street Settlement. Legion at Sensei, Team, Envoy, Guild and Greyskul, Thrust Projects, Cuchifritos, and a few dozen others you'll have to stumble on yourself.