

The Washington Post

By *Blake Gopnik*

Sunday, May 23, 2010

It *is* not news, at least in the art world, that there's a gallery scene on Manhattan's Lower East Side. It is news that, as of this spring, that scene seems to have finally, fully arrived. Washingtonians spending Memorial Day weekend in New York could do worse than to head to the Lower East Side -- the downtown neighborhood east of the Bowery, south of Houston Street -- and take in its art. For a decade or more, the area's few galleries have been known for wacky, street-inspired work, often built on kiddie clichés of artistic rebellion. (A lot of doodling; a big dose of acid-trip "self-expression"; not a crisp line in sight.) A recent visit showed that at the same time as the scene has grown, its art has grown up.

Most of the neighborhood's 40-odd galleries are in former storefronts, so they aren't anything like as huge as the deluxe galleries across the island in Chelsea. (Though Chelsea-ites are moving east -- Lehmann Maupin gallery now has a polished Lower East Side annex, and Sperone Westwater has announced its move to a grand new home on the Bowery that is almost finished.) Unlike most Chelsea galleries, which can tend toward spectacle and bombast, Lower East Side art spaces are human-scaled and, at their best, tend to show humane art whose ambitions are subtle.

Whereas even a good day in the mega-galleries of Chelsea can feel like a chore, with returns that don't quite merit the labor, an almost fruitless art tour of the Lower East Side can feel like time well-enough spent. Maybe that's part of the place's charm: Chelsea feels like it's designed to offer gold-plated investment opportunities; the Lower East Side, though its art is rarely as good, feels like it's out to provide pleasure.

Worse comes to worst, even when faced with irredeemable junk -- and there will still be days like that on the Lower East Side -- you can drown your aesthetic sorrows in one of the neighborhood's endless bars and restaurants, or recharge your batteries with a touch of hipster shopping.

Here are a few of the better venues and shows visited on a recent trip to the Lower East Side.

-- *CUCHIFRITOS* is one of the oldest art spaces in the neighborhood, founded as an artist-run center in 2001. It occupies a former storage room in Essex Market, whose stalls still supply foodstuffs to local Latinos and to their new yuppie neighbors. The non-commercial gallery is now directed by former Washingtonian Felicity Hogan, and happens to be showing the glass art of Graham Caldwell, once one of the leading lights of Washington's art scene but now based in Brooklyn. The most recent of his two wall-works still has the sleek, spiky forms he was known for in D.C., but it's held together by a gloopy resin mess that feels as if it could be a response to Brooklyn grit.

Caldwell's work seems surprisingly compatible with a video piece in the same group show, by artist Pawel Wojtasik, that shows a tight mass of pigs gorging themselves in an agro-business feedlot. It's hard not to think that we are supposed to compare ourselves with them, and maybe come off badly in the comparison. (The swine have had their piggish fate chosen for them by us; we don't need anyone's help to consume our way to oblivion.) At 120 Essex St. through June 19. Call 212-420-9202.

-- *SIMON PRESTON GALLERY* is a few years old, and has established itself as one of the area's more polished, professional venues. (Its stable includes John Gerrard, the Vienna-based Irishman whose video projections are now showing at the Hirshhorn.) Preston is currently presenting work by Carlos Bevilacqua, from Brazil. His peculiar sculptures often look like Tinkertoy models, but they are held together in a precarious state of balance no child could achieve. One elaborate mid-air construction, seemingly made from embroidery hoops, stays intact only with the help of two fine threads tensioned by hanging weights. Release the tension, and the art collapses. At 301 Broome St. through June 27. Call 212-431-1105 or visit <http://www.simonprestongallery.com>.

-- *LMAKprojects* is a small space that has left. Founded in Chelsea five years ago, it moved to the Lower East Side in 2008. The gallery's latest show, titled "As Is," presents images garnered from eBay by the conceptual artist Penelope Umbrico. One series of photographs looks like prismatic abstractions, with some pop-art elements thrown in. In fact, they are enlarged details from the images that sellers of broken LCD televisions include in their listings, hoping to prove that even though their objects' screens are trashed, the electronics behind them are still good for parts. As the gallery puts it, "Umbrico collapses the obsolescence and breakdown of new technology with the aesthetic formalism of utopian Modernist abstraction." And one of the screens shows a shattered image from Hello Kitty, which can't be a bad thing.

Another Umbrico piece presents a grid of little photographs of cardboard boxes; they evoke the plywood solids of Donald Judd or the sleek cubes of Sol LeWitt. In fact, they are the pointless photographs that sellers of television parts post on eBay, as though showing the outside of a cardboard box is somehow proof of the goods it contains. At 139 Eldridge St. through June 20. Call 212-255-9707 or visit <http://www.lmakprojects.com>.

-- *BLACKSTON*, now a tiny storefront gallery, once conducted business high up in a building in Chelsea. It is showing "Bagatelles," a series of color prints by the 38-year-old photographer Reuben Cox, who recently made the move from New York to Los Angeles. These new works are peculiar and charming: They document the smoke and orange flash of an explosion of gunpowder, in settings that range from deep in the woods to inside the photographer's studio. You wonder which counts as the work of art, the temporary kinetic sculpture represented by the light and smoke of each explosion, or the photographic surface that reveals it? Given that they register the technology that gave birth to modern war, Cox's pictures feel surprisingly lighthearted. At 29C Ludlow St. through May 28. Call 212-695-8201 or visit <http://www.blackstongallery.com>.

-- *LISA COOLEY*, one of a bunch of galleries now gathering on Orchard Street, is showing colorful work by a Texas sculptor named Andy Coolquitt. Sitting somewhere between found-object assemblage and eco-friendly design, Coolquitt's works tend toward head-high sticks that lean against the wall, often with fixtures and light bulbs attached -- as though he'd had to cobble together a floor lamp from fragments of old canes, broom handles and piping. The smallest, simplest work in the show somehow manages to hold its own, and provoke a smile: It's nothing more than a tiny swatch of aquamarine nylon, less than an inch by an inch, pinned in place with a clear-plastic thumbtack. If there's already too much junk in our consumerist world, Coolquitt manages to add as little to it as possible -- without entirely abandoning the material pleasures of art. At 34 Orchard St. through June 27. Call 212-680-0564 or visit <http://www.lisa-cooley.com>.