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ART; Lower East Side: Art Shoehorned Amid Charm

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Among the art neighborhoods of Manhattan, the Lower East Side is by far the most picturesque. With its dusty synagogues, squeezed-together tenements, anarchist graffiti and shop signs in Yiddish, Spanish and Chinese, it's a visual event whether you're visiting galleries or not.

But the essence of a city is change, and this neighborhood is changing. The synagogues and signs are disappearing, along with the anarchist spirit and artist-friendly rents. Chic little bars and boutiques speak of rampant yuppification, although at the moment -- and a sullen economy could prolong this -- old and new are still trading places.

Art has its part in that negotiation, and always has. It both reflects and facilitates change. For more than a century the Educational Alliance on East Broadway has democratically provided instruction, studio space and exhibitions to artists. Important careers have emerged from it. Yet the sculpture on view in the alliance gallery now, though varied and energetic, smacks of an earlier generation. Contemporary Chelsea feels far, far away.

By contrast, Chelsea feels very close to another institution, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, which moved from far West 22nd Street to the Bowery a year ago. The museum exemplifies the developing boho-luxe mode of the Lower East Side. It makes a neighborhood that was once an alternative to establishment culture a welcoming home to that culture.

In line with this the museum is described as anchoring a local art scene, and in some sense it does, judging by the other Chelsea transplants clustered around it. Some, like Envoy, Feature, Thierry Goldberg Projects and White Box, have relocated. Others, like Lehmann Maupin, have opened second spaces here, joining galleries like Participant Inc. and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, which remain top attractions.

The specific turf these galleries define is bordered on the north by East Houston Street, on the south by Canal Street, on the west by the Bowery and on the east by the river. The art topography has no logic, but galleries are concentrated in several spots: on a short block of Rivington Street between Bowery and Chrystie Street; on Stanton Street between Eldridge and Forsyth Streets; and at the south of Orchard Street.

As in Chelsea, painting is dominant. And the New Museum sets the tone with two surveys, one devoted to the figurative painter Elizabeth Peyton, the other to the abstract work of Mary Heilmann. Enthusiasts of both will find agreeable things in galleries nearby.

At Feature, Daniel Hesidence picks up the abstract thread and give it some freshness. With their oval forms and torrential brushwork, his pictures resemble fingerpainted portraits left out in the rain. At Envoy, Augusto Arbizu achieves Rorschach effects with enamel paint dripped onto advertisements torn

from Artforum. The original ads are for artists Mr. Arbizo admires, though the line between homage and defacement in his paintings is thin.

Stefan Sandner's scrawly text paintings at Museum 52 are also tributes, possibly unintentional. Their deep obeisance to Richard Prince makes them of minor interest. In a broader sense the same is true of abstract paintings by Lisa Hamilton at Jane Kim/Thrust Projects and Logan Grider at Thierry Goldberg. The work, though solid and well schooled, is a throwback, barely updated, to earlier modernist styles. It feels like the equivalent of 20-somethings -- Mr. Grider was born in 1981 -- blissing out on Mel Tormé.

The painting and photography by the Japanese artist named simply Mr. at Lehmann Maupin is also retro. A Takashi Murakami protégé, he has the de rigeur graphic skills, but the manga-pop genre he traffics in has seen its day. I preferred Steve Smith's shadow-box watercolors at Invisible NYC. They're clever, cartoonish, totally slight and don't pretend to be more. And, seen in a gallery that doubles as a tattoo parlor, they fit the Loisaïda ambience to a T.

Alejandro Cardenas's paintings of insectlike aliens at James Fuentes, a gallery tucked away in a fascinating 19th-century pocket below Canal Street, also have modesty to recommend them. And so do Joe Bradley's quite large paintings at Canada. All you see when you enter Mr. Bradley's show is a scuffed-up blank canvas. And the six paintings in the adjoining room offer just one rudimentary image each: a cross, for instance, a Superman logo, the number 23. But because the artist doesn't call on painterly competence, the work stands out in a gallery scene that has, overall, the ready-for-prime-time surface sheen of an M.F.A. show.

Mr. Bradley is best known for multipanel paintings that could be mistaken for relief sculptures. And sculpture has some presence on the Lower East Side. The artists at Anonymous Gallery -- Anthony Lister, Greg Lamarche, Maya Hayuk, Monica Canilao -- recently created environments inside shipping containers that they situated near downtown museums. In the gallery these environments have been removed from the containers and flattened out. Accumulation, with exacting placement, is the name of the game.

At the minute Number 35, a part-sculpture, part-painting installation by Adam Hayes joins elements from Gothic cathedrals and Las Vegas casinos into a kind of funk-antique architecture. Elsewhere, at Smith-Stewart, Nicole Cherubini goes straight to the Classical past in ceramic sculptures. Hefty kraters are pieced together from many decorative parts in an kind of reverse archaeology. This is art that begins rather than ends with breakage.

Far east on Canal Street there's an ambusher of a piece titled "History" by a Shanghai sculptor named Xu Han Wei, an alter ego of the wily artist Terence Koh. Set in the dead-white gallery space of Asia Song Society, and viewable only through the window, "History" consists of a dark-skinned mannequin wearing animal skins, Jimi Hendrix bell-bottoms, an Afro wig and African beads. Monumental and funny, it was created for the presidential election, though its political vibes are healthily ambiguous.

Mr. Koh is a conceptual artist who does hands-on things. So is Julieta Aranda, from Mexico, whose solo show at Fruit and Flower Deli is mostly computer printers spewing out paper covered with the typed letter S. The installation has something to do with the notion that if you give enough chimps enough computers and enough time they could write "Hamlet." At least I think that's the gist, though you never know in a gallery that has an oracle in residence (invisible) and a director called the Keeper (real name: Rodrigo).

Ideas and objects have equal weight in Sam Lewitt's show at Miguel Abreu, basically a multimedia essay on the arbitrariness of material value and symbols. The symbol under scrutiny is the MGM lion logo, which, as is explained in a demanding gallery news release, embeds references to Columbia University and ancient Rome. Intricate is an inadequate word for Mr. Lewitt's labor-intense, thought-through art.

A conceptualist associated with performance art, Clifford Owens is having a first New York solo at the new On Stellar Rays. The diarylike texts and photographs add up to a survey of this intriguing artist's still-young career, with one element still to come: a video of a performance done in the gallery.

Video is scarce on the Lower East Side, but what's there is good. Sari Carel has a dreamlike piece at Nicelle Beauchene, filmed at the Bronx Zoo with charismatic performers, among them a giraffe with a Garbo profile. A cool, tender installation by Josh Tonsfeldt at Simon Preston includes spider webs, a barn dance and photographs of horses. And there are beasts galore in the inaugural group show at Kumukumu made up of images of rabbits. Joseph Beuys, Ray Johnson and Kiki Smith make it (sort of) work.

Enterprising art trekkers will want to seek nongallery installations that are part of the three-borough show "Metro Poles: Art in Action." The Lower East Side components, in the Charles B. Wang Community Health Center (268 Canal Street) and the Chinatown Manpower Project (70 Mulberry Street), are organized by the Asian American Arts Center, a veteran nonprofit space now economically imperiled.

A point of reference to present economic straits is raised by Melanie Baker's painting "Abracadabra II (Alan Greenspan)" at another alternative space, White Box. There it is in the group show "Sedition," one of the few displays of political art in a neighborhood once a hotbed of activism.

For a trip back to a less radical past, which is where a lot of present art seems to be heading, drop by Woodward Gallery for a "where did this come from?" show of Ad Reinhardt ephemera, notably billets-doux to a young painter, Olga Sheirr, with whom he had a long affair. They met when she was 19 and one of his students. He traveled; she traveled. They got together when they could. When they couldn't, he sent her postcards of art from around the world. An educational alliance indeed.