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Arts

ART REVIEW; Where Witty Meets Gritty

By HOLLAND COTTER
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CULTURALLY speaking, Manhattan's Lower East Side is the underground's underground, a radical alternative to most alternatives you can name. Immigrants and club kids, cranks and mystics, the lost and the found, the high and the dry, have long called it home and still do, along with a professional army of young 10-to-6ers who have sent rents through the roof.

Poetry and art have both had big moments here, in the 1960's and 1980's respectively. Poetry sustained some of that momentum; art did not, but this could be changing. In the last two years, several galleries have opened in the neighborhood roughly defined by Houston and Canal Streets, the Bowery and the East River, joining others already there. A brand new alternative space -- Participant -- opens on Rivington Street today. Artists Space, now in SoHo, has hooked some property, tentatively at least. The New Museum is said to be looking hard. In addition, there is activity, steady if far from seismic, in the East Village to the north and in Chinatown to the south, areas that are part of what might be called the Greater Lower East Side.

The art being shown is a mix of the raw and cooked, which is always true. A Saturday in Chelsea can easily be a day without sunshine. But the Lower East Side is an intensely un-Chelsea experience, with street life instead of foot traffic, buildings that are actually lived in and evidence of organic life -- the smell of cooking, the sound of salsa, the sight of babies, bodegas, garbage, gardens, old brick and wood, and shop signs in many languages -- everywhere.

Participant is the invention of Lia Gangitano, director of an earlier nonprofit venture, Thread Waxing Space, in SoHo, which closed last year. Thread Waxing Space was huge; Participant is not, though it, too, has a multidisciplinary agenda that includes exhibitions, performances, readings and publications. Its office space will be shared with other local cultural groups: the New York Underground Film Festival is scheduled to move in come spring.

The inaugural show, an installation titled "Grow Room" by the young Philadelphia artist Virgil Marti, certainly sets the place aglow. Mr. Marti has covered the walls in sheets of reflective Mylar, the kind used to raise plants (notably marijuana) in hydroponic gardens. Each sheet is imprinted with images of flowers -- poppies, roses, hydrangeas -- and patterns of broken linear grids. Suspended from the gallery ceiling are chandeliers made from colored resin casts of deer antlers, with blossoms at the tips.

Like much of the artist's work, the outcome is a merging of pop culture, art history, weird science and adolescent fantasy. The silvery look was inspired by both "2001: A Space Odyssey" and Whistler's Peacock Room. The images of grids derive from scientific photographs of webs spun by spiders who had been fed drugs. The total environment has the psychedelic wooziness of a fun-house mirror disconcertingly crowned by trophies of a kill.

Participant's glass-plated exterior makes the installation visible from the street, though how the gallery's connection to the existing neighborhood will work out remains to be seen. Even before the space opened a bit of graffiti appeared on its facade: "Another art gallery. There goes the neighborhood." But Participant has the marks of a winner. Laura Parnes, Kathe Burkhardt, Kim Gordon, Charles Atlas and the team of Lovett/Codagnone are scheduled for solos shows; the poet Eileen Myles is organizing a program of readings; Mr. Marti is a scintillating and auspicious opening act.

The Scene gallery, a few blocks away, opened two and a half years ago in a typically cramped Lower East Side storefront. And its directors, Sara Safiullah and Ra'kaa Shabaka, who are from London, have taken full advantage of the neighborhood's cosmopolitan flavor to show artists from Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States, many of them in American debuts. The program is smart and eclectic and keeps producing surprises, which is what galleries should be in the business of doing.

It has a big one in "Alive and Kicking: The Collages of Charles Henri Ford." Ford, who died in September at 94 and is best known as a writer, was an early version of today's global artist. Born in Mississippi, he moved to Paris, where he immersed himself in the city's hyperkinetic avant-garde and was a co-author of a gay novel titled "The Young and Evil." In New York he hung out with Andy Warhol, then spent a lot of time in Asia. In the last half of his life he produced copious amounts of poetry, as well as films and sculptures; in the early 1990's he began a series of small Surrealist-tinged collages, dozens of which are in the show.

Ford seems to have clipped much of the collage material from design, nature and soft-porn magazines, then pieced the visual data together with shrewd wit, binding the series together with the motif of half-abstract, often-priapic male figures resembling those found in early Dubuffet. Someone will have to tackle a retrospective. Meanwhile, the Scene makes an important contribution with this show and reconfirms its own position as a leader among local institutions, several of which -- including Collective Unconscious, Clayton Gallery and Outlaw Art Museum, Zito Studio Gallery, and the Angel Orensanz Foundation -- are sponsoring a Lower East Side art tour on Nov. 24 (212-529-7194 or www.orensanz.org).

While the Scene highlights the career of a senior historical figure, Rivington Arms -- a narrow, white-box-style space run by Melissa Bent and Mirabelle Marden -- offers the solo bow of a very young artist, Jonah Koppel, who earned his undergraduate degree from the Rhode Island

School of Design only last year.

The work takes the form of fictional portraits, most of them drawn in graphite on felt. The faces in "Series: Idiots" could be based on mug shots of criminals, pictures of victims of violence or of the insane. Like John Currin, Mr. Koppel takes a slippery approach to a realist mode, creating images that register as identifiable but aren't. He applies an additional twist by partially cutting out a section of each face -- an eye, a nose -- and leaving the flap of loose cloth to hang down like flesh.

The outstanding entries, though, are two larger-than-lifesize male heads sculptured from gray, claylike Plasticine and fitted with glass eyes and dentures. The mix of hand-modeled and hyperreal manufactured additions makes the heads look both like official portraits and cyrogenic specimens, an effect reinforced by their display within Plexiglass vitrines. A promisingly offbeat debut.

Kurt Novak's exhibition at Gallery Onetwentyeight is also of portraits, but made with a digital scanner. Mr. Novak has his subjects press their faces and sometimes their bodies against the scanner's surface, then manipulates the results by computer to produce vertically or horizontally fractured images that look intriguing in some cases, merely contrived in others. The real strength of this nonprofit gallery, established 16 years ago by the artist Kazuko Miyamoto, lies in its frequent group exhibitions, which bring artists of different generations, many of them women, together. Every now and then, though too seldom, a show will include work by Ms. Miyamoto herself, an excellent sculptor.

ABC No Rio has been around even longer -- 22 years -- and to get an idea of what "alternative space" once meant in a Lower East Side context, consider its early history, which dates from a time when the neighborhood was being devastated by poverty, drugs and real estate speculation. The art that came out of No Rio's scrappy city-leased space was anarchic in spirit, collaborative in format, activist in intention. A street poster that read, "Get Wrecked, Get Political" distills its flavor.

The work shown here now is still politically oriented, as the title of the current group show, "Fear, Paranoia and Malevolence" suggests. But on the whole, it is a different kind of political art: formally more polished, conceptually more oblique, suggesting social and psychological tensions rather than naming names or depicting events. A photographic piece by Kelly Copper, for example, includes several images of flying planes; just one is shown dropping nose-downward from the sky, but once you spot it, a sense of incipient disaster colors everything.

Other pieces are about ideological conflicts in the making. In a video installation by Michael Estabrook, voices endlessly repeat the word "war" in Arabic and Hebrew; Fred Fleisher uses dolls to suggest lessons of racial discord learned early. The overtly political work is Lina Pallotta's group of photographs documenting protests in Mexico over the unexplained disappearance and deaths of young women working in foreign-owned factories. In this case, violence is a real political fact; the tension lies in where it will strike next.

Although far less confrontational than of yore, ABC No Rio still focuses its attention on the surrounding community, with free art workshops and a public computer center. So does the Artists Alliance, which has offices in the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural and Educational Center on Suffolk Street, and a small gallery, Cuchifritos, in the Essex Street Food Market.

The current show, titled "Social Space" and organized by David Gibson, gives the not-small theme of urban existence a light-touch spin. Daily work is part of the picture, exemplified in a project by Jill Epstein involving the participation of M.T.A. bus drivers and Devon Dikeou's punch-clock for artists. Matthias Geiger refers to the passing-through status of tourists and immigrants in a photograph of see-through figures at Kennedy Airport. Two silk-and-fur corner sculptures by Lizzie Scott soften and sensualize the gallery's functionalist architecture, while Patricia Smith's cartographic drawings propose the dubiously utopian design of an ashram that doubles as a corporate retreat.

East Village

Actually, many of the area's institutions do double duty of various kinds. The estimable Tribes Gallery at 285 East Third Street, run by Steve Cannon, gives equal time to art and jazz. (It was between exhibitions this week.) The Bowery Poetry Club, founded by Bob Holman, is primarily a venue for readings, but also does exhibitions: at present it has a charming installation by Jenny Snider of vibrantly painted sculptural cars swarming across a wall.

Both Tribes and the Poetry Club are, strictly speaking, part of the East Village scene, where the gallery boom of the 1980's lasted a few years before being overwhelmed by establishment competition and a bad market. Still, a handful of its old, doughty nonprofit galleries still survive, and do so in style.

One of them is Kenkeleba House, run by Corrine Jennings, which has a beautiful survey of photographs by Beuford Smith. Mr. Smith joined Kamoinge, a workshop for African-American photographers, in 1965 -- he is now its president -- and the earliest pictures here, including one of a man weeping for the dead Martin Luther King Jr., date from that era; others, including a color image taken on Lower Broadway two days after 9/11, are recent. This is an impressive body of work, imaginative and humane, and Kenkeleba has done well by it. Bright, semi-abstract paintings by Linda Hiwot hang in the adjoining gallery.

Also afloat is P.S. 122, a converted public school building with a performance space -- who could ever forget Ethyl Eichelberger's appearances there? -- and a compact gallery. Its current three-artist show has attractive abstract paintings by Mary Schiliro and Lili White, and -- the pièce de résistance -- a sculpture by Linda Herritt that includes a pair of pink ziggurats floating over a vat of Pepto-Bismol.

If Ms. Herritt's meaning is hard to define (and it doesn't matter; the piece looks good), there is little doubt about what's on Max Schumann's mind in the paintings and collages hung salon-style in the lobby of the Theater for the New City. Titled "Things Are Still Being Smashed," the show reworks covers of popular magazines like Time and National Geographic to pull out messages of cultural and military aggression. Mr.

Schumann is the son of Peter Schumann, who founded Bread and Puppet Theater and whose poetics of protest, like the paintings in the show, suit a neighborhood where ideological resistance still simmers .

The most idiosyncratic exhibition around, though, is at ATM Gallery on Avenue B, which is showing wonderful geometric drawings by Vince Roark. Mr. Roark is in his 70's and lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he has been doing similar work, along with related sculptural constructions, for some 40 years. His tools are simple: pencil, pen, colored markers, compass and protractor. But his ideas about dimensional exploration -- ones that jibe with utopian scientific theories of early modernists like Malevich and Kandinsky -- are complex.

Apparently, Mr. Roark is a fixture at the Kansas City Art Institute, admired by students -- one wall of the show is devoted to photographs of his friends and admirers -- and by at least some of the faculty members, although he has no official connection to the school. ATM's director, William Brady, who is a graduate of the institute, brought the artist to New York for the opening; and his presence added a memorable dimension to an art which at its best, in the large, dense, labor-intensive drawings, shimmers with a kind of exalted concentration. I think it is safe to say that you would be unlikely to find the equivalent of this work, or this artist, or of an artist-run gallery with the eye and heart that Mr. Brady brings to his, anywhere else in town.

Chinatown Area

One way to reach the Greater Lower East Side's southern extension is through the area between the East Village and SoHo known as NoLiTa (North of Little Italy), where the gallery called Sterilemind is tucked away among cafes and boutiques. Owned by Liesl Eisenbeiss, a photographic historian, it specializes in new photography and is showing work by the South African-born Adam Beinash, who has done magazine work in New York. His Avedonish color portraits of young friends looking spaced out or winsome aren't all that gripping; there's a surfeit of such stuff around. Better by far are his unpeopled shots of deserted carwashes, garages and city streets. They have a textured, hard-to-identify air of mystery without romance, which is good.

In Chinatown proper, farther south, three galleries are within close walking distance of one another and all are of interest in different ways.

Maccarone, which occupies two floors over the felicitously named Kunst Hardware store, is owned by Michelle Maccarone, formerly of the Lühring Augustine gallery in Chelsea. She started in business more than a year ago with a spectacular installation by the Swiss artist Christoph Büchel, then others by Christian Jankowski and Olaf Westphalen. The all-boy streak is now broken in a solo by Claudia and Julia Müller, Swiss-born sisters now living in New York.

The show includes large-scale collaborative drawings done from found objects (pizzeria menus, rock club posters) and photographs (Carnival revelers, children dressed as American Indians), random pieces of a hybrid culture in which everything is a little ordinary and a little strange. They are nice, though not as out-there as the smaller drawings the Müllers showed at the Clocktower a few years back.

Their installation upstairs titled "Idylls" includes a projected video of drawings. The main image is of a nuclear family -- two adults, two children -- that continually alters in appearance. Figures fade in and fade out, changing sex and race in the process so that various combinations of heterosexual "difference" are played out in a gentle acknowledgment of a social and genetic revolution that is, in fact, in progress.

A few blocks west, Canada, which relocated from Lower Broadway after 9/11, is ensconced on the ground floor of a former brewery and run by a group of artists, including Sarah Braman, Aaron Brewer, Phil Grauer and Wallace Whitney. At the moment it has large watercolor, dye and ink paintings on paper by Anke Weyer, a young German artist who studied with Per Kirkeby; they are sort of opaque, with figures of women floating up from under a welter of abstract strokes. Mr. Grauer has transformed the smaller back gallery into a blank paper cave begging for some graffiti. (Actually, it has some.)

Although in place here for less than a year, Canada has already done interesting things -- I'm sorry I missed Mr. Brewer's show earlier in the fall, which looks good in photographs -- with more to come, including a solo by David Askevold, an American conceptualist now living in Nova Scotia. Carrie Moyer may turn up later on the schedule. Technically a for-profit space, it operates on a shoestring; and it is an example of what professional grit, and artists' collective determination to take the exhibition-and-sales game into their own hands, can do. More power to them.

Farther south, behind a hard-to-spot door next to a McDonald's on the lower Bowery, is the Asian American Arts Center, which has been fighting the good fight on behalf of under-exhibited artists for nearly 25 years. Under the direction of Robert Lee, this nonprofit space has given many Asian-American artists, young and old, exposure impossible to find elsewhere. Up at the moment is an annual group show, a collaboration with the Korea Society in Manhattan, including string installations by Mary Ting and C. J. Lee, and abstract paintings and drawings by Eva Lee and Kaori Ukaji, who recently had a solo show at the Scene gallery.

Like the nearby Museum of the Chinese in the Americas, where two new shows open Thursday, the Asian American Arts Center is a hard-working, meagerly financed grass-roots institution that caters to community needs but has an internationalist perspective broader than that of most galleries in the mainstream.

If Chelsea is a gated community representing New York art's corporate face, the Lower East Side is a wide-open neighborhood garden nurturing its deep multicultural roots.

The Gallery Trail

The exhibitions reviewed by Holland Cotter:

Lower East Side

ABC NO RIO, 156 Rivington Street, between Clinton and Suffolk Streets, (212) 254-3697. "Fear, Paranoia and Malevolence." Through Nov. 26. Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5 to 7 p.m.; Sundays, 1 to 3 p.m.

CUCHIFRITOS, 120 Essex Street, inside the Essex Street Food Market, between Delancey and Rivington Streets, (212) 598-4124. "Social Space." Through Nov. 30. Hours: Mondays through Saturdays, noon to 5:30 p.m.

GALLERY ONETWENTYEIGHT, 128 Rivington Street, between Essex and Norfolk Streets, (212) 674-0244. Kurt Novak, "Portraits." Through Dec. 1. Hours: Thursdays and Fridays, 3 to 7 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, 1 to 6 p.m.

PARTICIPANT, 104 Rivington Street, between Ludlow and Essex Streets, (917) 488-0185. Virgil Marti, "Grow Room." Through Dec. 22. Hours: Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 7 p.m.

RIVINGTON ARMS, 102 Rivington Street, between Ludlow and Essex Streets, (646) 654-3213. Jonah Koppel, "Plasticine Heads." Through Nov. 27. Hours: Tuesdays through Fridays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 6 p.m.

THE SCENE, 42 Rivington Street, between Forsyth and Eldridge Streets, (212) 674-0508. "Alive and Kicking: The Collages of Charles Henri Ford." Through Dec. 12. Hours: Tuesdays through Saturdays, noon to 7 p.m.

East Village

ATM GALLERY, 170 Avenue B, between 10th and 11th Streets, (212) 375-0349. Vince Roark, "Stereometry and Stereoscapy." Through Nov. 24. Hours: Thursdays through Sundays, noon to 6 p.m.

BOWERY POETRY CLUB, 308 Bowery, between Bleecker and Houston Streets, (212) 614-0505. Jenny Snider, "Commercial Traffic." Through Nov. 30. Hours: Mondays through Fridays, 9 a.m. to midnight; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m. to midnight.

KENKELEBA HOUSE, 214-16 East Second Street, (212) 674-3939. Beuford Smith and Linda Hiwot. Through tomorrow. Hours: Wednesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

P.S. 122 GALLERY, 150 First Avenue, near Ninth Street, (212) 228-4249. Linda Herritt, Mary Schiliro, Lili White. Through Nov. 24. Hours: Thursdays through Sundays, noon to 6 p.m.

THEATER FOR THE NEW CITY, Lobby, 155 First Avenue, between Ninth and 10th Streets, (212) 475-0108. Max Schumann, "Things Are Still Being Smashed." Through Dec. 31. Hours: Mondays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sundays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Chinatown Area

ASIAN AMERICAN ARTS CENTER, 26 Bowery, south of Canal Street, (212) 233-2154. "Contrary Equilibriums." Through Nov. 22. Hours: Mondays through Fridays, 12:30 to 6:30 p.m.; Thursdays to 7:30 p.m.

CANADA, 55 Chrystie Street, between Hester and Canal Streets, (212) 925-4631. Anke Weyer and Phil Grauer. Through Dec. 14. Hours: Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 6 p.m.

MACCARONE, 45 Canal Street, between Orchard and Ludlow Streets, (212) 431-4977. Claudia and Julia Müller, "Idylls." Through Dec. 5. Hours: Tuesdays through Sundays, noon to 6 p.m.

STERILEMIND, 230 Mulberry Street, between Prince and Spring Streets, (212) 941-6767. Adam Beinash, "In Reality." Through Dec. 12. Hours: Tuesdays through Saturdays, noon to 7 p.m.

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