

## SOHO SIGHTSEEING WITH CHEN TAMIR

### Palimpsest of Bohemian New York

by Chen Tamir

#### AVANT-GUIDE TO NYC: Discovering Absence

Apexart  
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10013

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*Avant-Guide to NYC* is a wonderful and thoughtfully curated exhibition that is also quite hard to place. Not an historic survey, not a thematic group show *per se*, and not a typical geographically defined show, although it centers around New York City. It brings together work by mostly rising and mid-career (by loose standards) internationally active artists working in this city, grappling with the legacy of previous generations and the cultural milieu which they shaped and by which they were shaped in turn. All of the artists are heady, conceptual types who rely heavily not simply on text, but on actual data. Their point of departure is the legacy of particular artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark and John Cage and how such work has influenced the worldviews of this new generation. They mine New York City and its intertwined cultural history, and the resulting works reveal this city as a palimpsest of bohemian life and cultural acts.

What makes this show layered and complex is that it goes for detail, not broad movements. Many of the pieces weave in specific works by historic artists as way of “digesting” or processing their cultural inheritance.

There are two works that serve as points of entry to the show, both broad maps laying down the history of New York’s cultural movements and their passage over its urban landscape. Ward Shelley’s *Specific Sites* is a beautiful flow diagram superimposed over a map of the city. The inclusion of the map is a new development in his oeuvre. He is known for paintings reminiscent of Mark Lombardi’s work, text-heavy diagrams of politics and history, and sometimes “portraits” of individuals. Complementing this is Dexter-Sinister’s brochure to the show, with curator Sandra Skurvida’s amazing text. It melds seemingly unrelated historic points on the city map to tie in the works in the show, reading like a Rube Goldberg chain reaction.



The show is densely hung and some gems particularly stand out. Alex Villar’s *Broken Window* takes Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Food* and *Window Blow-Out* and conflates them with recent scenes of urban life to create a storyboard for a film in progress. Villar’s work resonates beautifully with Nina Katchadourian’s *Two Leaps* that parallels two suicides that took place in SoHo about three decades apart. The first is of Gordon Matta-Clark’s brother’s, Sebastian, and the second of Katchadourian’s neighbor. Katchadourian frames notes and diaries, creating panels that trace out a mirrored story board of its own. Similarly structured in panels, Xaviera Simmons’ work centers around Vito Acconci’s early performance pieces, photographing the sites they had taken place in and her hand-drawn lists of them.

The memory of place figures strongly in all of the works. It seems to be a manifestation of our collective and individual reverie of the watershed of post-modern artists and the rich scene they created in the 1970s. The ones gathered here are not lacking in the same engagement and thoughtfulness of their predecessors. This is a rich, museum-quality exhibition that is a must-see for any cultural consumer in New York.



Images: Ward Shelley, *Specific Sites* (2009), DETAIL. Courtesy of the Artist; Dexter Sinister, *Timebend* (2009). Courtesy of the artist & Apexart; Ward Shelley, *Specific Sites* (2009). Courtesy of the Artist.