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ART

Yes, Amid the Boutiques, SoHo Is Still Avant-Garde

By KAREN ROSENBERG

Pity SoHo, the neighborhood that launched a thousand acronyms and, in the process, earned the art world's collective disdain. Once it had Gordon Matta-Clark, the New Museum and any gallery worth mentioning; now it has Prada, Topshop and the Apple Store.

But there's avant-garde life in SoHo yet, particularly if you include an area beyond its northern and western fronts, alternately known as the Lower West Side and the Far West Village, to which the gallery district now extends (and which may one day be home to [Renzo Piano](#)'s 185,000-square-foot downtown Whitney).

Generally speaking, the galleries in SoHo proper are survivors. They stuck around through the recession of the early '90s and the Great Migration to Chelsea (though those that could opened branches in other neighborhoods).

But they have some enduring company: Dia's decades-old installations of Walter de Maria's "Earth Room" and "Broken Kilometer," at spaces on Wooster Street and West Broadway; various nonprofit art groups; and alternative spaces .

For a quick study of local art history, there's a fascinating show called "Avant-Guide to NYC: Discovering Absence" at the alternative space Apexart. The show, which comes with a map/brochure by the design collaborative Dexter Sinister, deals with long-gone sites of the city's art scene, including [John Cage](#)'s Monroe Street loft (addressed in a mixed-media piece with old photographs and a rendering of the building) and the first East Village galleries of the art dealer Gracie Mansion (who is seen in a video visiting the restaurant and shop that have replaced them). Don't be confused by the Kim's Video sign outside Apexart; it's part of the exhibition.

You can often find art that dates from SoHo's glory days at the Peter Freeman gallery, hidden on the sixth floor of a building at the congested corner of Broadway and Prince Street. Up now is a reprise of a 1974 installation by the wry, museum-mocking Belgian Conceptualist Marcel Broodthaers (1924-76). It consists of a caged African gray parrot, a set of palm trees, some exhibition catalogs and a recording of the artist reading one of his poems in French.

The poem is mind-numbingly repetitive, but the bird is strangely silent. (She only talks when visitors aren't around, according to a gallery employee.) That's just one of the ways in which this piece, "Don't Say I Didn't Say So — The Parrot," confounds expectations.

At Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Vitaly Komar (formerly of the duo Komar & Melamid) is showing new

paintings that fuse religious, political and New Age symbolism. Crosses, sickles and serpents combine in red-and-blue Cubist compositions, with a bust of Stalin thrown in for good measure. Mr. Komar appears stuck in an ironic post-Soviet groove; by comparison, his erstwhile partner Alex Melamid has been making paintings of hip-hop stars.

Also in a logjam is Slater Bradley, at Team Gallery, still practicing his '90s-fanboy schtick in paintings based on bootleg Joy Division album covers. Photographs of wanly attractive young models and a video of a child romping in the surf don't portend a way out.

But just around the corner is Kristin Baker's rousing show at Deitch, her third solo there. Ms. Baker has been pushing her large-scale, Day-Glo abstractions into more organic territory, while retaining a futuristic edge. Much effort has been put into the three-panel "Bash Bish Rubicon," but don't miss the modestly sized works on structural supports of transparent PVC and aluminum.

For competent abstraction on a much smaller scale, look to Helmut Federle's five paintings at Peter Blum. In each, angular forms in nuanced shades of olive drab swirl around a central void. And for humorous abstraction, stop at the Drawing Center's Ree Morton survey.

Next door at the Spencer Brownstone Gallery, the Barcelona artist Jaime Pitarch is showing everyday objects sardonically recast as sculpture. He's shaped surveyors' levels into cursive letters (spelling something unprintable here) and carved jagged pieces from a Coke can to make it look like a shattered glass vessel.

Crossing SoHo's western boundary, West Broadway, you'll come to some of the neighborhood's most recent arrivals. The two current solos at the four-year-old HarrisLieberman gallery, of Matthias Dornfeld and Virginia Poundstone, split the difference between tasteful painting and the theory set.

Mr. Dornfeld, a German, paints women and vases of flowers with a cruel charisma reminiscent of Emil Nolde. Ms. Poundstone's installation, involving a wall-to-floor landscape photo and a ceramic kitchen counter, offers commentary on the Dutch tulipomania and more recent market bubbles.

A few blocks north, Kaari Upton has a fantastically weird and affecting show at Maccarone. There's a huge, grottolike sculpture with several video projections showing on the walls; a series of "paintings" made with smoke on oil-covered panels; and (best of all) extremely violent drawing-sculptures made by crushing a charcoal-covered wax figure against the wall. It all revolves around a narrative of stalkerish love and possession.

Michele Maccarone's neighbor, Gavin Brown, is between shows (Spencer Sweeney opens on Wednesday), so it's north and a little east to the heart of the West Village. Just past the Magnolia Bakery's cupcakes and across from Cafe Cluny, you'll find the bijoulike town house of the Tracy Williams gallery. Perhaps it's the setting, but Alyssa Pheobus's text-based drawings on large sheets of handmade paper there seem to have softened since her solo show in Chelsea last January. They now include lullaby lyrics and a Sufi devotional poem, albeit surrounded by barbed lines in heavy graphite.

Just as charming is a show of paintings by [Liu Ye](#) a few blocks away at Sperone Westwater. His doll-like girls in traveling clothes defy most of the agit-pop stereotypes of Chinese contemporary art, though titles

like “Banned Book 2” are quietly subversive.

The logical wrap-up to the tour is “Looking Back: The White Columns Annual,” a year-end highlights show at the alternative space White Columns that is unabashedly subjective. This year’s installment has been organized by Miriam Katzeff and James Hoff, who run a nonprofit artists’ book publisher called Primary Information.

The art they’ve chosen is aggressive, confrontational and very downtown. The mix includes a candid lightbox photograph taken at a gallery party by Reena Spaulings; large and jubilant paintings by Dorothy Iannone and Albert Oehlen; Cyprien Gaillard’s violent and mesmerizing video “Desniansky raion”; and Lutz Bacher’s paparazzo-emulating series “Jackie & Me.”

Where the West Village meets the meatpacking district, art is just one of many diversions. But White Columns, it’s worth remembering, was founded by Gordon Matta-Clark in a loft on Greene Street. Galleries that are vital and adaptable can live on, long after neighborhoods have turned.

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