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Why New York's Most Important Art District Is Now the Lower East Side

By Casey Lesser



“Chinatown definitely feels like it’s the new Lower East Side,” says the young gallerist Ellie Rines when we met at her gallery, 56 Henry. “I feel like that’s kind of unquestionable.” The space is a tiny white cube, measuring just eight-by-eight feet, and is nestled on a quiet thoroughfare by the Manhattan Bridge dotted with dumpling and noodle shops, Chinese groceries, Protestant churches – and, especially as of late, galleries. Inside the white cube (now featuring Hanna Liden) gives way to two antechambers – a hidden viewing room, and beyond it living quarters where the gallerist offers me a cup of tea and some perspective on the rampant art scene that’s multiplying around us.

Rines is a part of a recent migration that has galleries gravitating to the Lower East Side and Chinatown. She opened 56 Henry in December 2015, just four months after being forced to shutter her previous microgallery 55 Gansevoort – an elevator shaft a block east of the Whitney – after Restoration Hardware bought its building. The new gallery sits on a stretch of Henry Street that also includes Chapter NY, Cuevas Tilleard, and newcomer Shrine, and is just blocks from Chinatown stalwart Reena Spaulings Fine Art and now the shiny new Foxy Production. Notable neighbors also include freshly launched programs like Erin Goldberger’s New Release, located in a former video store, and Jeffrey Stark’s gallery in the basement of the East Broadway Mall. And

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not a stone's throw away are the southern bounds of the Lower East Side, where hundreds of more galleries gather.

This burgeoning Chinatown scene is a piece of the puzzle that has seen a sharp uptick over the past few years in the number of galleries downtown. In September 2015, *Crain's New York Business* reported that the Lower East Side was home to some 224 galleries, a number that has steadily climbed since before 2007, when the New Museum opened on the Bowery. The real surge began in 2011. A handful of early settlers like Cuchifritos (opened 2001), Canada (opened 2002), and Reena Spaulings (opened 2003) set up shop in the neighborhood well before the museum's opening. But many more joined in the year prior to it – Miguel Abreu (opened 2006), James Fuentes (opened 2007), and Eleven Rivington (opened 2007) among them. And further yet, established galleries such as Salon 94 and Lehmann Maupin soon swooped in to open downtown outposts.

Less than a decade later, history is repeating itself. Hardly a week goes by without murmurings that yet another gallery is opening (or reopening) on the Lower East Side or in Chinatown. The reasons vary. Real estate is a significant factor. But the sheer variety of galleries indicates that there's more than rising rents and taxes at play. Particularly over the past two years, a broad swath of galleries – blue-chip galleries, established Chelsea dealers, European galleries, artist-run galleries, young curatorial projects, and deep-pocketed self-starters among them – have taken the plunge and moved downtown.



291 Grand Street, home of James Cohan Gallery, Gavin Brown's enterprise, 47 Canal, and Nathalie Karg Gallery. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.



Work by Sadie Laska at 56 Henry. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.

In 2016 alone, we've already seen the reopening of 11R (formerly Eleven Rivington), Metro Picture's new temporary space on Pitt Street, Pierogi Gallery's Manhattan debut, and Foxy Production's opening in Chinatown. Johannes Vogt and Derek Eller will follow suit later this spring. Danzinger Gallery and CRG have moved from Chelsea to the Lower East Side, and

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LMAKgallery to Chinatown. New galleries Magenta Plains and Totah opened in the Lower East Side. Karma has moved to Orchard Street. The list goes on.

Meanwhile, the perception and reality of art in the Lower East Side – namely, its position relative to Chelsea – has changed drastically. Galleries in the neighborhood have matured greatly, as has the art they present. And Lower East Side stereotypes (hole-in-the-wall spaces, unknown artists with half-baked ideas) have been soundly dispelled. While downtown galleries remain places for experimentation and shedding conventions, that experimentation isn't the sole domain of young art world darlings. Mathew showed Richard Phillips last fall; Magenta Plains (which took over Launch F18's former space) opened three weeks ago with a show of new and early works by William Wegman.

The rising real estate costs in Chelsea have doubtlessly contributed to galleries' downtown migration. Many galleries that moved into Chelsea have recently reached the end of decade-long leases, leading them to face severe rent hikes, and in some cases, no option to renew. "Today, rents on the best blocks can run from \$120-145 per square foot," says Stuart Siegel, senior vice president in office brokerage at CBRE Group. Ten years ago, according to Siegel, rents were less than half that.

Where the "best blocks" used to just mean 22nd, 24th, and 25th Streets between 10th and 11th Avenue, that's now expanded as far south as 17th Street and into the upper 20s. Siegel points to the completion of the High Line, the opening of the Whitney, and the influx of new tenants in Chelsea – from tech, fashion, and other creative industries, as well as major corporations like the luxury car dealership Tesla – as catalysts behind recent ascents in the area's real estate costs. "Less expensive Chelsea rents can be found in higher-quality spaces in the Lower East Side," says Siegel. So, while some galleries have been forced to move out of necessity, unable to keep up with the cost of their space, others saw the end of a lease as a chance to start anew.



Exterior view of bitforms gallery. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.

For Betty Cunningham, who moved her gallery from Chelsea to the Lower East Side in 2014, real estate was the bottom line. "Economically, it was becoming extremely difficult not to work for your landlord and to be free to do what you want to do," says Cunningham. "You really need to sell works at high prices" in order to survive. It wasn't just the high rent that pushed her out: "Chelsea

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was getting way too expensive; our real estate taxes alone had gone from \$1,500 the second year to \$42,000 the last year.” She’s now located on Rivington Street and recently took over the end of the lease for the space next door (it was formerly Eleven Rivington). She says she’s quickly come to prefer the Lower East Side.

Steven Sacks, owner of bitforms gallery, faced a similar situation in 2014, when the end of his lease on 20th Street was approaching. “We were in Chelsea for 13 years, so we were there when things weren’t as developed,” Sacks tells me. “It was a bit more of a warehouse-y kind of environment and didn’t have all of the condos and the High Line and all of hoopla that’s there today. It was a nice place for galleries to gather and have reasonably priced rent.” But that changed: “It became a pretty major destination for the artists in New York City.” Two years before his lease ran out, Sacks jumped at the opportunity to move his gallery to Allen Street. “I decided to just be proactive and see what else was out there, I didn’t feel comfortable paying super high rents in Chelsea and to be honest I just wanted to get out of that scene; it wasn’t really feeling welcoming anymore.”

A decade ago, the New York art world might have looked to Brooklyn for the next frontier for galleries. Instead, a rapid cycle of gentrification has dampened the potential for a thriving community of commercial galleries in Williamsburg. It’s this very issue that prompted gallerists Joe Amrhein and Susan Swenson of the neighborhood staple Pierogi Gallery—located on North Ninth Street since opening in 1994—to relocate across the East River to Suffolk Street. “Williamsburg has had a wonderful history of showing art and of artists living there, but a lot of it has dissipated because of gentrification,” says Amrhein. “A lot have moved to Bushwick, Ridgewood, Red Hook, and other parts of Brooklyn and Queens. And as people move around, it’s hard to get a lot of attention now.” They were drawn to the concentration of galleries in the Lower East Side, and the crucial mass of critics and collectors that consistently descend on the neighborhood’s openings. “The quality of the galleries here and their willingness to take chances—we want to be a part of that,” he adds.

This existing community of galleries is a consistently cited catalyst for many of the galleries who have moved to the Lower East Side. Organizations like the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA), which is located on Chrystie Street, as well as the neighborhood’s tightly knit streets and numerous art-world residents, have fostered a sense of welcome that’s often missing from other, more post-industrial gallery-concentrated neighborhoods. As the community of galleries downtown has strengthened, so too has the art-going audience there—including collectors. And a small network of determined gallerists has now grown and been added to in order to become a life force that fosters profitability.



Pierogi. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.

This rising tide argument, that better galleries foster the growth of other better galleries downtown, was a common thread across my conversations over the past two months. “The Lower East Side has shifted so much in the past two years,” says Rines back at 56 Henry. “Look at something like Eleven Rivington,” Augusto Arbizio and John Van Doren’s gallery on Chrystie Street, rebranded and reopened as 11R this past January. “That space is so pristine and beautiful, it’s like a Chelsea gallery.” Rines suggests that success stories like this one are inspiring other galleries to get in on the action. “I think a lot of it is because of the success of James Fuentes, Eleven Rivington, and Rachel Uffner—that they want to stay where they are, and they’re able to open up these really beautiful spaces,” says Rines. “Anything goes now. The Lower East Side doesn’t have to be ghetto and dingy anymore.” (It can also still be dingy when it wants to be, she jokes.)

While Rines looks to galleries like James Fuentes, Fuentes himself points to an earlier point in the Lower East Side’s development as the impetus for his own space. Fuentes, who grew up in the neighborhood, recalls being excited by the possibility that the neighborhood had for galleries back in 2003 or 2004. He lived across from Maccarone on Canal Street and nearby Canada on Chrystie. And he watched as Orchard Gallery, a cooperative run by 12 individuals including artists Andrea Fraser and R.H. Quaytman, opened on Orchard Street. “At that moment I felt like there was really so much potential for the development of a great community of galleries down here,” he recalls.

Fuentes opened a two-story space on St. James Place in Chinatown in 2007, which he initially lived in but vacated to expand the exhibition space. Three and a half years later, he moved to his current location at 55 Delancey Street, which was the only gallery on the street at the time. In late 2014 Fuentes expanded the gallery, and last year he opened Allen & Eldridge, a small project space in the basement. All the while he’s developed a roster of artists ranging from revered photographer Jonas Mekas to internet darling Amalia Ulman. “I’ve started to reinvest in my gallery recently,” says the gallerist of his recent expansion, which he says itself is motivated by a responsibility to continue to see the neighborhood continue to thrive. “Gentrification is so rampant in this neighborhood, I felt this desire to carve out a space for contemporary art while we still could,” he explains. “Galleries are getting priced out of Chelsea, but in a few short years we’ll probably be priced out here. Rather than move out, I decided to carve out a real position here.”

RJ Supa, who opened Louis B. James with David Fierman on Orchard Street in 2011, was immediately drawn to the neighborhood. “I was friends with people down here; it’s a community,” says Supa. “I didn’t really even consider Chelsea, just because it felt like I would probably get lost in the shuffle, being a smaller gallery with a roster of emerging artists.” And over the course of the past five years he’s seen remarkable growth. “I remember when we were first opening and meeting collectors and I was telling them where I was and I had this one collector say ‘I didn’t know there was anything east of Bowery,’” he recalls.



Louis B. James. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.



Lyles & King. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.

A similar sense of community led Foxy Production co-founders Michael Gillespie and John Thomson to leave a ground-floor space on Chelsea’s 27th Street, where they had been since 2003, for a second-floor space in Chinatown, thus risking a loss of foot traffic. But the critical mass of like-minded peers was also a huge draw: “The galleries that are in Chinatown, like Chapter NY or Reena Spaulings, they have a certain character and I think people will be interested in seeing that character expand,” Thomson says. “Where we are is close to Lower East Side—there are hundreds of galleries there.”

Isaac Lyles opened Lyles & King with his wife Alexandra King-Lyles on Forsyth Street last May after debuting at NADA New York (where they showed up-and-coming artists MacGregor Harp and Chris Hood). “It’s a community that’s more accepting of younger, emerging artists,” Lyles tells me over the phone. “This is where my family is—this is my art family. The galleries here are part of the backbone of the NADA community; these are the people that are my mentors and peers.” Lyles & King is a prime example of a new gallery that is built around a program of artists on the rise—in addition to Hood, Lyles’s budding roster includes Phillip Birch and Davina Semo. “As much as things still continue to potentially move around, to the Upper East Side and Harlem, for example, the Lower East Side is still a community of people doing interesting and dynamic programming and going to bat for emerging artists that they believe in.”

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Because of the community’s focus on emerging artists, one might assume that the collectors frequenting the Lower East Side differ from those visiting the Upper East Side and Chelsea. “After opening the space, I think we thought that there would be two distinct audiences,” says Serra Pradhan of Marianne Boesky’s Clinton Street outpost, Boesky East. “But we learned that it’s really a lot of the same people, that people are going to Chelsea on Saturday and Lower East Side on Sunday.” Nathalie Karg, who moved her gallery from Great Jones Street to the fourth floor of 291 Grand Street in March of last year, echos that the Lower East Side custom of staying open on Sunday “is a major benefit” to galleries in the area. “Collectors often say they make a point to come on Sunday,” spending their Saturday afternoons in Chelsea and uptown, says Karg.

The neighborhood’s multiplicity as both a favored hangout and a gallery epicenter does give it a wider reach than more art-specific neighborhoods like Chelsea, however. Case in point is Richard Taittinger, who opened his eponymous space on Ludlow Street in March 2015. When I visit Taittinger produces his iPhone, which is fixed on an image from Miley Cyrus’s Instagram account, picturing the artwork we’re standing next to—a sculpture of a tongue made from pink acrylic fingernails by South African artist Frances Goodman. He laughs as he mentions that he’d like the pop star to purchase the piece, but points seriously to the hundreds of thousands of likes the image garnered.

For many galleries who have moved or expanded to the Lower East Side—whether those with established programs like Marianne Boesky and James Cohan or others still emerging—a downtown space is an opportunity to provide their artists a new context to be inspired by. “We wanted to try something different and look for a space that could give our artists a new challenge,” says Foxy Production’s Thomson of their move from Chelsea. Former watering holes, tenements, and offbeat shops have left galleries with a wealth of non-traditional spaces for showing contemporary art: Boesky’s space used to be a beauty supply shop; Cohan’s corner lot was a fish market; Taittinger’s gallery was a music venue called the Living Room.



Boesky East. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.

When I visit Jesse Greenberg at 247365, the two-floor Stanton Street gallery he runs with fellow artist MacGregor Harp, he’s quick to point out the advantages of spaces downtown. “Having a more intimate and weirder, out of the way space is kind of what excites artists,” says Greenberg.

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“Going to Chelsea is like going to a big-box store or something—though not all of them. The amount of artist-run spaces and young curatorial endeavors downtown is energizing.”

Greenberg speaks from experience. “I show with Derek Eller and he’s working on his space on Broome Street now,” says the artist/gallerist. (Eller rented a former auto-body shop at 300 Broome Street, where he anticipates opening in May of this year.) “I’m excited as an artist to be showing there because I feel more connected to what’s happening around here.” Greenberg began 247365 with Harp in Brooklyn in 2012, alongside Primetime and Know More Games in Carroll Gardens (dubbed the Donut District due to the nearby Dunkin Donuts). They developed a following there but jumped at the opportunity to open a space in the Lower East Side—a basement on Eldridge Street that formerly housed Eli Ping’s gallery. Greenberg explains, “When Eli Ping decided to move, we were at a place where things were going well in Brooklyn, and the gallery was beginning to support itself. So we said, ‘Well, we could either start paying ourselves or we can get another space.’ It sounded fun and a little crazy, so we just did it.” They moved again in spring of 2015, to the current space, where they now turn out two new shows every five weeks—always with openings that spill out onto the sidewalk—and just announced their first artist roster, including Brian Belott, Lizzie Fitch, and Lukas Geronimas, among others.

For established and blue-chip galleries, downtown spaces serve as complements to their existing locations. “We made a conscious decision not to recreate a Chelsea-like space,” says Pradhan of Boesky East—which opened in May 2014 and maintains the surrounding neighborhood’s aesthetic with a simple aluminum storefront and the building’s original mosaic detail on the facade. “Boesky East was more focused on having things be a little more spontaneous in feel, and a place where you can experiment,” she explains. It’s become a place to give gallery artists their first solo shows, or to lend them a setting that is less daunting to fill and better suited to their work than the more traditional, lofty setting of the Chelsea gallery.

Aside from inspiration, smaller spaces can also be advantageous for artists and gallerists both, given the current demands placed on them by the art market. Most established and mid-career artists constantly manage relationships with multiple galleries worldwide, all attempting to schedule shows amid a seemingly never-ending list of art fairs for which all of those galleries want work to show. So the less-demanding, more experimentation-friendly spaces offered downtown are a blessing. And for galleries, being able to keep more artists in their stable happy is no small thing, too.



Richard Taittinger Gallery. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.



The future site of Derek Eller Gallery. Photo by Owen Dodd for Artsy.

“We’ve been in the same space for a number of years and one of the things artists really respond to is the space you have,” says David Norr, a senior director at James Cohan, whose main gallery remains on 26th Street. Norr works out of their corner Lower East Side space at 291 Grand Street, which he says attracted the gallery because of its “great proportions and great natural light.” They opened last November with a show of psychedelic drawings by Robert Smithson, effectively doubling the opportunity for their artists to have exhibitions in New York. The building has become a major gallery hub, now housing 47 Canal, Gavin Brown’s enterprise, and Nathalie Karg above Cohan. All moved in since summer 2014.

Of course, with growth inevitably comes questions of if and when it will all end. “I thought a few years ago that the Lower East Side had sort of peaked,” says James Fuentes. “But actually, at this point, I don’t think it has quite yet.” Rents have risen dramatically in the neighborhood, too, “and there’s often speculation about where could be next,” says the gallerist, adding that this is an inevitable cycle that the New York City art world goes through every 5 or 10 years. “Harlem is a viable place to relocate or open a gallery.” (Gavin Brown and Elizabeth Dee are headed there.)

But, regardless of how long this expansion will continue, what’s certain is that the New York art paradigm has irrevocably shifted: “It used to be peripheral to Chelsea, but now, for a true art lover, coming to Lower East Side to visit galleries is mandatory,” says Fuentes. “It’s on a totally equal playing field, just generally on a smaller scale.”

So as Lower East Side galleries move onward and upward, they may have to move out. But for now, we’re left with the largest, highest-quality, and most vibrant downtown art community the city has ever seen—and we should take advantage while we can.

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