

rachel uffner

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Lower East Side story

By Gareth Harris

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Away from the frenetic, top-dollar art fairs that dominate Manhattan in March – including the Armory Show on the piers at 12th Avenue (March 3-6) and the 23rd 70-dealer ADAA (Art Dealers Association of America) Art Show at the Park Avenue Armory (March 2-6) – there is a corner of New York offering a different, more relaxed art experience.

In contrast to the imposing warehouse-like *kunsthalls* in midtown Chelsea, the downtown Lower East Side south of Houston Street is seeing more affordable, understated spaces emerge with over 30 young dealers moving into the area since 2007.

Traditionally a gritty, working-class neighbourhood peopled by Chinese and Puerto Rican immigrants, the Lower East Side (LES) art nucleus has emerged as a credible alternative gallery scene with contemporary art spaces springing up in spaces such as former storefronts. Galleries such as Blackston, On Stellar Rays, Lisa Cooley, Canada and Renwick have helped fuel a micro-bubble for emerging art in the past 18 months which, says New York-based art adviser Candace Worth, was in evidence at the Nada and Pulse fairs in Miami last December. “Good works priced under \$10,000 flew off the walls in Florida,” she noted.

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Lindsay Pollock, editor of Art in America, also sees Miami as a turning point, adding: "A handful of these younger gallerists are perfectly attuned to the times, hitting the perfect spot in terms of programme, sensibility and style." Chelsea has lost any air of intimacy, she says, observing that: "Dealers have historically migrated in search of cheap rent in edgy locales. Young dealers gravitated to a pre-gentrified East Village in the mid-1980s."

Prominent collectors, both new and seasoned, regularly head to this southeastern enclave. Author Marjory Jacobson makes a beeline for the Eleven Rivington, Miguel Abreu and Reena Spaulings galleries while collector Jamie Hort says the LES "generally has the advantage of a lower price entry point". "Museum buyers are also definitely in the mix," said Candice Madey of On Stellar Rays.

James Fuentes is typical of the new, ambitious LES dealer breed. The New York-born gallerist started out as an artist in the late 1990s, then opened and closed a 300 sq ft "shoebox" gallery in 1998 in SoHo (subsidising the venture by working as a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art), only to be taken on by former New York gallery giant Jeffrey Deitch in the early 2000s. In 2007, at the height of the boom, he opened a second space on St James Place and now represents 10 artists including Jonas Mekas and Jessica Dickinson. "Lower East Side galleries are kicking ass in the \$15,000 and under bracket," he says, stressing that his price points can reach up to \$65,000.

Fuentes and Cooley are bowing out of the Armory this year but Eleven Rivington will present a show of new works by Brazilian artist Valeska Soares priced from \$20,000 to \$75,000, to coincide with the Armory's Latin American focus. Pieces by the Icelandic conceptualist artist Katrin Sigurdardottir (\$2,500-\$3,000) and US practitioner Michael DeLucia (\$1,200-\$8,000) will also be available. **Another LES leading light, Rachel Uffner Gallery, will show works by Gianna Commito and Sam Moyer, with prices ranging from \$1,200 to \$6,000.**

The Armory boasts 76 dealers across pier 92 (modern art section) and 194 galleries on pier 94 (primary market contemporary work) which sees 53 newcomers this year. But 70 galleries present last year are not participating this season. Among the absentees are a number of major New York dealers such as Tanya Bonakdar and David Zwirner gallery which, according to a spokeswoman, is putting its resources into other fairs such as Art HK in Hong Kong in May and Fiac this autumn in Paris (a 50 square-metre stand at the Armory costs \$40,000).

"New York dealers can come and go from the fair and yet still enjoy the bump in the market created by the Armory," said an Armory spokeswoman.

Zwirner is, meanwhile, devoting his booth at the prestigious ADAA fair to the late US artist Alice Neel with works priced from \$500,000 to \$950,000.

There are, nonetheless, plenty of European dealers lined up to appear on the piers. "We are participating in the Armory because it is still the major platform in New York; we did it last year and sold out the booth," says Josh Lilley of the eponymous London gallery, who is showing paintings by Carla Busuttill ("Boss Boys" (2011) £10,000) and Vicky Wright ("Guardian LII" (2011) £9,500).

Veteran London dealer Timothy Taylor is returning to the fair after a one-year hiatus with works by Jessica Jackson Hutchins and Susan Hiller ("Rough Times" (2010) colour dry prints are around £45,000).

It is not surprising that Europeans want a slice of the US art cake. "People are definitely spending more money here than six months ago. Collectors who entered the market in the past five years are really beginning to understand that art is an asset class," says Worth.

Spending momentum gathered apace at the postwar and contemporary auctions in London earlier this month in what is still undoubtedly a buyers' market. Most New York dealers canvassed remain upbeat, but resolutely cautious, about this market bounce.

The usual smorgasbord of satellite fairs (at least 10 of them) and related events during Armory week reflect a healthy art ecosystem. Independent, the edgy indie kid of the New York fair scene is back for a second year at the former Dia Centre in Chelsea with over 40 participants, including Rodeo of Istanbul, Sprüth Magers of Berlin and Jan Mot of Brussels (stand fees cost up to \$12,000; there are no booth walls).

Meanwhile, an exhibition of works by artists such as Sam Anderson and Zak Kitnick, drawn from the collection of London-based art stalwart Anita Zabludowicz, takes over the 33rd floor of 1500 Broadway (March 1-April 15) while *Moving Image*, an intriguing new contemporary video art event with over 20 exhibitors, launches in the Waterfront Tunnel event space (March 3-6).

But Manhattan feels fragmented as a fair destination. Georgina Adam, editor-at-large of The Art Newspaper, says: "Other cities – Paris, Basel or Miami Beach – have just one fair that brings together various strands. So why doesn't New York, at the heart of the art market, have just one blockbuster fair, such as Art Basel?" She points out that location is a major issue in the city with no obvious, large-scale sites available; the Great Lawn in Central Park is hallowed turf for most New Yorkers who may not warm to a fair tent in their verdant oasis.

New York is still one huge art funfair all year round post-crash – Basel, which hosts the world's most important fair every June, is hardly a throbbing art hot spot. So does the city really lack that white-knuckle, main art event?

There are unconfirmed rumours that the Frieze Art Fair, which draws the art glitterati to Regent's Park in London every October, may launch a US version in midtown Bryant Park.

"I don't think the LES galleries would suffer or benefit from a blockbuster fair. The gallery scene we are cultivating here is already stronger than that. I think the top collectors already know this as the galleries in the area continue to grow and take risks in a much more substantial way than you will see in a fair," says Madey, a dealer at the heart of a gallery scene that is quite a distance from those 12th Avenue piers.