

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

The neighborhood of Bushwick, Brooklyn is the art world's recession special. In the last decade, this broken quadrangle, a one-time hellhole of riots, arson, and drug violence, has become an artist haven. The urban renaissance that lifted even the bleakest corners of New York City left this gray landscape of low tenements and light-industrial factory buildings with some room to grow. At the same time, a wave of rising rents pushed many of the city's artists from west to east—from the East Village to Williamsburg and Greenpoint and finally to Bushwick. Inexpensive, just a subway ride from Manhattan, the neighborhood presented a gritty and expansive urban tableau.

Several of the city's outlying neighborhoods, from the South Bronx to the Gowanus Canal, have seen an influx of artists in recent years. Still, Bushwick became a community unto itself, a latter-day commune of youthful energy in the shadow of an industrial wasteland, a world away from downtown. The trust-fund bohemians of the Bowery School and the Lower East Side may have landed shows at Deitch Projects and overdosed on their de Menil credit cards, but the Bushwick School seemed content to remain obscure. For those on the outside, Bushwick appeared impenetrable, even unappealing.

The neighborhood's affordability and open spaces allowed its artists to develop largely independent of market forces. The

factory-style production that defined the art of the last decade was disregarded in favor of a more intimate, material-based studio practice. Skim off the froth, and many members of the Bushwick School might be seen as the spiritual descendants of the process-based painters who first settled in Soho in the 1960s and 1970s.

Its slow maturation has left Bushwick vibrant but ephemeral. The question has been how to make its idealism sustainable. Hundreds of the neighborhood's artists have been organizing annual Bushwick Open Studio weekends each June. Several artists run informal year-round galleries out of their studios. A few commercial spaces have opened (and often closed) in basements and garages and storefronts, with names like Pocket Utopia, English Kills, Factory Fresh, and Famous Accountants. Nevertheless, the Bushwick School's market presence has remained limited, which has been both its defining feature as well as a growing practical concern.

A sympathetic curator named Jason Andrew, who lives in Bushwick but often works in the world of blue-chip New York, has been trying for years to bring some professionalism and maturity to the Bushwick scene without compromising its off-the-grid ethos. A curator of the Jack Tworikov estate, Andrew has created a non-profit arts organization called Norte Maar out of his living room on Wyckoff Avenue that exhibits local artists, holds perform-

ances (broadcast onto the street), and works with neighborhood children.

Buying art out of someone's living room may be intimate, but it is also awkward, which may be one reason why Bushwick's popular artist-run exhibitions have often failed to find buyers. Now Andrew has opened a small gallery on Wilson Avenue in partnership with the accomplished mid-career painter Deborah Brown. Called simply Storefront, the prosaic-looking, fluorescent-lit gallery that was until recently an accountant's office (the awning still reads "TAXES") is an attempt to give art retail in Bushwick a better name.¹

Storefront's inaugural group show delivers on a promise to feature "the work of artists we know, the artists we like, and the artists we'd like to get to know better." The exhibition presents a solid cross-section of Bushwick's artistic production, with artists who work, live, or regularly show in the neighborhood. Deborah Brown's own contribution, a painting titled *Green Sky* (2009), is an homage to Bushwick, with a loft of pigeons flying above a chain-link fence (pigeon coops are common there, and birds often circle above the rooftops).

The exhibition ranges from abstract drawing and painting (Rico Gatson, Aurora Robson, Michele Araujo, Theresa Hackett, Brooke Moyses, Kevin Regan, Mary Judge), to intimate realism (Matthew Miller, Amy Lincoln, Bill Adams), to collage (Ellen Letcher, Andrew Hurst, Hilda Shen). A number of works feature an unusual mixture of various media (Justen Ladda's shellacked cedar wood, Stephen Truax's sewn fabric, Steve Pauley's granite, Austin Thomas's assembly of paint, collage, and newsprint).

A young sculptor named Jimmy Miracle—his real name, by the way—reminds me of Christopher Wilmarth, another spiritual artist who sought to "depict not the thing but the effect that it produces," in the words

¹ "First Exhibition" opened at Storefront, Brooklyn, on January 2 and remains open through February 6, 2010.

of Mallarmé. Miracle, who was last on view at another Bushwick gallery called Sugar, works with common materials like string and paper to evoke ineffable space.

Andrew and Brown have done a service to the artists of Bushwick with the opening of Storefront. They have also opened up the Bushwick School to the larger arts community with well-selected, affordable work that is representative of the area and now easy to see. Storefront offers a one-stop shop for anyone who wants to support the serious art coming out of this unique neighborhood.

Art is not produced in a vacuum. The context of creation, while never a complete explanation, can provide a point of access to a body of work. In the 1950s, a group of young abstract artists in Chicago decided to buck the city's entrenched establishment and form their own cooperative gallery. Many of these artists eventually moved away to become well-known names: Robert Natkin, Aaron Siskind, and John Chamberlain. Lesley Heller Workspace on the Lower East Side now brings the Chicago group together with work from the 1950s and today in a show called "The Wells Street Gallery Revisited."²

That Bushwick's own Jason Andrew is the curator of this exhibition might further demonstrate his neighborhood's affinity (or at least Andrew's affinity) for the studio-based art communities of the past. The Heller show is thankfully light on social history and tells its story through the works on display.

Judith Dolnick's *Untitled* (1957) is a standout, as is Ernest Dieringer's small work on paper, *Sketch for Zig Zag* (1961), Donald Vlack's carefree drawing *Untitled* (1955), and Gerald van de Wiele's *Voices of Caves* (2008), a sculpture of carved wood. If one attribute connects the work, it is the

² "The Wells Street Gallery Revisited: Then and Now" opened at Lesley Heller Workspace, New York, on January 20 and remains on view through February 28, 2010.

Chicago School's light-heartedness when compared to the Ab Ex angst of New York.

In an economic downturn, it can be a challenge for artists and galleries to sell new work without undercutting their own established prices. A great majority of artists who never benefited from the over-inflated market now face devaluation as more art chases after fewer collectors.

One answer can be to produce smaller work. Not only does the banal statistic of square inches often determine an artwork's price, but with the housing market still in flux, who knows what will happen to that wall space above the sofa. Fewer collectors have the confidence right now to purchase large works of art.

Another smart tactic is to branch out into other media with a less established price point, such as works on paper. Paper operates in a different economy from oil on canvas. A work on paper can sell for much less than a similar sized oil without devaluing a painter's market.

From what I understand about the general demands of the art market, works on paper are also less desirable. Here is a prejudice I could never get my head around. Paper gives us access to the artistic process in a way that a finished oil cannot. Paper also reveals a delicacy of line that often gets lost in the thickness and vibrancy of paint.

The curators at Danese must be on the same page, so to speak. The gallery has pulled together an extensive, wide-ranging group show of works on paper.³ I tend to gravitate toward drawing that leaves things open. Smudges, erasures, and a general lack of finish best reveal the artistic process and leave you with the taste of graphite and ink.

My good friend Tom Goldenberg has contributed a stick-cracking landscape, *Damm Hill* (2008), to the Danese show. Barry Le Va has an electrifying black ink abstraction, *Twin-Diode-Pendode from Elec-*

trode Series (Plan Views for Sculpture) (2002). Richard Serra has a gummy mess, *Stratum G* (2006), that looks like it saw the business end of a tire.

Danese has organized the show through an intelligent hanging, but many of the smaller pieces still get overwhelmed in the gallery's cavernous space. A few temporary walls could have broken things up and brought us closer to the drawings. Unlike oils on canvas, works on paper are often at their best in confined environments—ideal, you might say, for apartment living.

Should I have titled this month's column The Jason Andrew Chronicle? Probably so, because Andrew helped organize a Jack Tworkov exhibition now on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash.⁴

It was a sign of the times when the UBS Gallery closed its doors for the last time following its exquisite Tworkov retrospective, which I wrote about in these pages in September. Like UBS, the Mitchell-Innes & Nash exhibition gives us an opportunity to evaluate Tworkov's often dismissed later work from the 1960s and 1970s, when he adopted a more structural and less expressionistic style. And again, this work looks better and more active with each viewing. *Idling II (WNY-70 #1)* (1970) operates through subtle tonal modulations to arrive at a mysterious vision barely perceptible through a thicket of paint. *Trace* (1966) has a similar effect. *P73 #7* (1973) uses thin white borders to create the illusion of prismatic screens of paint layered on top of one another.

The later work is anything but sentimental. One tends to miss the heroic, tattered heraldry of earlier abstractions such as *Barrier Series #5* (1963). Still, Tworkov was on to something. They may not be his most likable canvases, but the mark left by Tworkov's innovative late paintings is most distinctly his own.

³ "Works on Paper" opened at Danese, New York, on January 8 and remains on view through February 6, 2010.

⁴ "Jack Tworkov: True and False" opened at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, on January 15 and remains on view through February 20, 2010.