

How Bushwick Became the Leader of NYC's Arts Scene

By Stephanie Murg | July 1, 2015 |



The Minus Objects by Michelangelo Pistoletto, 1965-1966, at Luring Augustine, Bushwick.

On a recent balmy evening in New York City, art lovers prowled the latest exhibitions of their favorite galleries, picking a path among warehouse-like spaces and more intimately scaled rooms before concluding their crawl at Luring Augustine, where inky new canvases by Christopher Wool, one of the most important abstract painters working today, hung on pristine white walls. That this scene transpired not in the western reaches of Chelsea but in Bushwick, in northern Brooklyn, is a testament to the rising cultural status of a neighborhood that in recent years has emerged as both a creative hub and an art destination. Because of its growth and buzz, Bushwick is now at the leading edge of the New York art world, whose white-hot center over the last four decades has migrated from Soho to Chelsea to the Lower East Side to Williamsburg—as the neighborhoods, transformed by their cool factor, became hot real estate destinations and unaffordable to artists who helped put them on the map.

A 20-minute subway ride away from Lower Manhattan, the neighborhood dates back to the time of Peter Stuyvesant, who chartered “Boswijck” (“town of the woods” in Dutch) in 1661 as a late addition to the New Netherland colony, although the boundaries have been shifting ever since. The cartographically inclined can find it south of Flushing Avenue, bounded roughly by Broadway, the Queens border, and the Cemetery of the Evergreens.

Bushwick's artistic boom is easier to trace. "Bushwick Open Studios is the reason the 'Bushwick art scene' is referred to as the 'Bushwick art scene,'" says Nicole Brydson, who, with husband and fellow artist Rhett Henckel, runs Bushwick-based Misfit Media, which works closely with local artists, filmmakers, and small businesses on digital promotion and online media projects. Established in 2006, Bushwick Open Studios is the annual festival of Arts in Bushwick (AiB), an all-volunteer organization. More than 600 studios participated in this year's event, held over the first weekend in June. "For the artists, it is a humble and rich opportunity to share their work," says Brazilian-born artist Cibele Vieira, an AiB organizer. "For the public, it's a unique experience to go inside the most intimate space of artistic creation, on a grand scale."



Man in Armor, Deborah Brown, 2015

Vieira moved to Bushwick from Michigan nine years ago. In her photographs, elements of the urban landscape take on a dreamlike quality that is both playful and regal. She credits Bushwick Open Studios with helping her get her first solo show, and points to the "stronger sense of community" that has developed among Bushwick artists and galleries over the last several years. "It's gotten bigger, deeper, and more professional," says Vieira.

The neighborhood's now-flourishing gallery scene was seeded by local artists. Deborah Brown, a painter and installation artist and a seminal figure on the Bushwick art scene, recalls arriving in Bushwick in 2006 to find artists but few places to congregate in an area just beginning to recover from decades of depopulation, divestment, and neglect. "Artists like me started galleries as a way to create community by showing the work of our fellow artists in lofts and apartments," says Brown, who runs Storefront Ten Eyck and is represented by Lesley Heller Workspace on the Lower East Side. The Bushwick-Ridgewood Gallery Group, which she founded three years ago, is now a 60-member organization.

Brown's most recent body of work, in which portraits emerge from colorful painted thicket, is directly related to her surroundings. "The figures are constructed of lines, colors, and marks whose origin and inspiration come from the junkyard material I observed around me in

Bushwick,” she says of the abandoned buildings reclaimed by nature and the monumentlike mountains of crushed cars she discovered during early expeditions near her studio and gallery.

In recent years, the spectrum of Bushwick galleries has broadened to encompass work in a range of media created by artists that run the gamut from emerging to blue chip. Microscope Gallery bridges the white cube and the black box, specializing in the moving image, sound, digital, and performance art. “We tend to like artists who take risks with their works, push boundaries,” says Elle Burchill, who founded the gallery in 2010 with fellow artist and curator Andrea Monti. Last fall, Microscope more than quadrupled its exhibition space by moving to a new location on Willoughby Avenue.

Luhring Augustine, a Chelsea mainstay with a roster of contemporary art heavyweights including Wool, Rachel Whiteread, and Glenn Ligon, opened a Brooklyn outpost in 2012. The gallery acquired its Knickerbocker Avenue building to use for storage until several Bushwick-dwelling staff members suggested holding exhibitions there. “It felt like a natural progression and a welcome opportunity to open part of the space to the public and engage with the artists and active environment of the neighborhood,” says Caroline Burghardt, the gallery’s director of publications and archives.

The rapid pace of change has made the question of “What is Bushwick art?” both popular and exceedingly difficult to answer. Attempting to define the community through the type or style of artworks that are produced within it is futile, according to Eric Heist and Kikuko Tanaka of Momenta Art, an artist-run, nonprofit exhibition space; they find the inability to align the neighborhood with a particular style or medium is invigorating. “Responding to globally synced artistic trends, there are many site-specific utopian projects, community art projects, and environmental projects. At the same time, Bushwick accommodates strong communities of formal art,” Heist explains. “In fact, Bushwick is a growing artistic chaos.” Long may it reign.