



The Ambidextrous Artist

Sep 13, 2015

The following post is part of "The Conversation Project" - a series of interviews with influencers in the contemporary art world.

[Deborah Brown](#) is a pioneer in the New York Art World. She is a prolific painter and also founder of Storefront Ten Eyck, a gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn, known for its ambitious programming. Deborah is a wonderful example of the ambidextrous artist, who is able to simultaneously create work, promote the work of others and play a major role in the community. We sat down for a conversation during a rainy morning to discuss the ever-changing landscape in the New York art world.



Deborah Brown in her studio. Photo credit: Youngna Park.

BW: What was your origin in art and how have you evolved as the art world has expanded?

DB: I came to New York 30 years ago, during which time I have seen artist and gallery neighborhoods migrate from SoHo to the East Village to Chelsea to Williamsburg and now to Bushwick and Ridgewood. Strictly on intuition, I bought a vacant factory in Bushwick in 2006, which I renovated to use as my studio. At that time, the artist landscape was very underground. Gradually DIY art spaces started to emerge. Using the internet and picking up flyers in the few coffee shops, you could get a sense of the presence of other artists and what they were up to. There was a very activist spirit. Groups organized to open artist-run galleries, lobby for food justice, create theater and stage pop-up music events. It was a very exciting time. Not many outsiders came to Bushwick then, so we were programming these spaces and events mostly for ourselves. The early galleries like [English Kills](#), [Pocket Utopia](#) and [Famous Accountants](#) became a focal point for the gathering of a creative community, which introduced us to one another and galvanized us to work together. I eventually opened [Storefront](#) with a partner in a space that I found on craigslist. It was a tiny 400-square foot storefront space on Wilson Avenue in a residential neighborhood, close to the Morgan stop. We had regular shows and public viewing hours. We ran it as a very professional space, and I think that set a new bar for what was going on in Bushwick. Gradually we developed a substantial and appreciate audience. The gallery moved two years ago to Ten Eyck Street in East Williamsburg and was renamed Storefront Ten Eyck. We are now in our 6th year of continuous operation.

My presence as a gallerist in the neighborhood has also led me to other kinds of involvements. I am on the Board, or have been on the Board, of [NURTUREart](#), [Momenta](#) and [BRIC's](#) Artist Advisory Board. I got involved in the not-for-profit world to build community through organizations that were much bigger than I am and were going to outlive my activities. I am also on Community Board #4 in Bushwick. I have a deep involvement in the neighborhood from many points of view.

I continued to do my own work as an artist. I am fortunate to be represented by [Lesley Heller Workspace](#) on the LES. I find that my involvement in these other activities in Bushwick has sharpened my eye about my own work and spurred me to make it better.

BW: Do you have a professional mission you're looking to accomplish?

DB: I believe that if you work with other people to create opportunities for others and improve your community, it will help you, too. An engaged, active stance has enriched my life beyond measure. I witnessed the opposite approach in Manhattan in the 80's 90's and 00's. It was intensely competitive and unfriendly: everyone for himself. When I came to Bushwick, it wanted to help create a different art world. The scene was so wide open that you could actually entertain such an idea. I knew we artists would build something extraordinary here, and I wanted to be a part of it. There's an altruistic, non-hierarchical ethos in Bushwick. We are trying to create a platform for many people to show their work and get recognition.



[Xiao Fu](#), "Pixel World," 2015, from "[Home Improvement](#)" on Rock Street, [Boar's Head Plant](#), 2015 Bushwick Open Studios.

BW: There was a level of ambition of some of the projects that were happening in Bushwick in the early days and the things that you have taken on in your gallery. Were there are few especially memorable projects?

DB: Some of these extraordinary projects have been done by other gallerists. I think [Chris Harding](#), who runs English Kills, has programmed some incredible projects at his space. One of his artists, [Andrew Ohanesian](#), recreated a demolished house from the neighborhood, complete with the facade, rooms, and their furnishings. It was a monumental undertaking and predictive of displacement and gentrification that has followed as artists moved into the neighborhood. I don't know how many people saw it. It was in the "early days" of Bushwick. I think that kind of scale and ambition has been carried on at newer galleries like [Signal Gallery](#) on Johnson Avenue.

I've had some impressive guest-curated group shows. [Ian Coffrey's "Re/Post,"](#) which just closed in July, paired the work of artists who came to prominence in the 90s with artists who are working in painting and video today. [Karen Bravin's "Inhabiting Ten Eyck"](#) exhibited site-specific work made for the gallery. [Kris Chatterton and Vince Contarinos's guest curated show "Spit Ball,"](#) was also terrific. I was especially pleased by a show I programmed after seeing the work of [Derek Fordjour](#) when I was a visiting critic at Hunter College where Derek is an MFA candidate, He had the first solo show in my big space. We received huge interest on

the part of museum trustees, museum directors and the press. We sold out most of the show. The work was moving and inventive.

For the last four years Lesley Heller and I have curated an outdoor sculpture show at the [Onderdonk House](#) and subsequently on [Boar's Head's Rock Street](#) during Bushwick Open Studios. I can't imagine many places other than Bushwick where this would be possible.

Shows that have ambition and transform a space are a signature of the Bushwick art community. They are created by artists and curators working without compensation, propelled by their own generosity. I think that is the hallmark of our scene.



Justin Cooper, "Canopy", 2015 installation, metal folding chairs, garden hose, Living Arts, Tulsa

BW: How do you work? Do you work mostly from intuition? How do you assess risks?

DB: I think every artist, gallerist or curator works from intuition. I don't represent artists, so I have a lot of freedom to program whatever I like. I might ask an artist to do a show because I respond to something about their work and I would like to see what they would do in my space. I take risks by giving others the chance to curate shows at STE. Their vision becomes part of the gallery and I'm not limited to show only what I already know.

BW: What is the best advice you've ever received?

DB: I don't know that I've had that many mentors in New York. I've tried to model myself on several people like Austin Thomas and Chris Harding, who were self-less,

focused, who were early beacons in Bushwick. I liked what they did and I wanted to do my own version.

BW: Looking back, what advice would have for your 22 year old self?

DB: Have confidence. Don't be discouraged by early failures. Stay in the game. The most ambitious people are in New York and some of the toughest people, and you are competing with them. If you really want to succeed here, you have to be ready to receive some knocks and keep going.

I heard an interview on the radio with the late [Marvin Hamlisch](#), a composer who had a lot of success over his lifetime. In the interview he says that everybody gets a potentially life-changing opportunity, but few people recognize it when it presents itself. The key is to see it so you can take advantage of it. For me, that opportunity was coming to Bushwick and starting over. I recognized it as soon as I got here. I didn't know where it was going to take me, but I saw it and jumped on it.

BW: How has your own work evolved?

DB: I responded immediately to the Bushwick landscape. Ten years ago it was so different than the manicured, polished landscape that a lot of us New Yorkers see in other neighborhoods. It had a funky "nature vs. culture" clash," derelict architecture and repurposed industrial structures with Rube Goldberg-like things slapped on top of them. Nature grew around these structures. It was an antediluvian swamp, industrial hulks and big skies. I'm romanticizing it a little bit, but that's how I responded to it and why I began to paint it.

As I worked on this subject matter, I became more focused on slag heaps in junkyards where piles of scrap metal rose against the sky like monuments to a lost civilization. Gradually the shapes began to resemble monumental heads. This trajectory led me to the works that I am doing now--zany portraits formed by the calligraphic vocabulary I developed in painting the slag heaps. The paintings began to look more like iconic portraits in art history. I followed these associations to focus on self-presentation in formal portraiture. I am in a dialogue between a linear drawing style that came from my study of the slag heaps and models in art history and formal portraiture. In my work, you recognize the referent but its articulation creates a displacement that is humorous and jarring.



Deborah Brown in her studio. Photo credit: Young Na Park

BW: Who has influenced you?

DB: Velazquez, Goya and Picasso's cubist paintings and sculptures. George Condo is a hero of mine. I think he is doing the same thing with his de-construction of art historical sources and the creation of a cast of characters.. I'm looking at a lot of British painting from the 17th, 18th, 19th centuries Rayburn, Reynolds and Gainsborough. Figures from literature and opera influence me as well.

BW: How do you work?

DB: I tend to do the little paintings more quickly and they either resolve or not, but the bigger paintings I might work on for months and months. Sometimes they might become totally different paintings, but I work on them until they can stay in my studio without my need to change them.



Deborah Brown, "Venetian", 2015, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in.

BW: What is your studio schedule?

DB: I get to my studio in the morning and I leave around 8 or 9 o'clock at night, so I work throughout the day. It depends if I am working on the admin stuff for a show at Storefront Ten Eyck, doing things in the gallery, cleaning the building or doing studio visits, but I am always here working some part of the day. I usually fiddle around on my computer to do the different activities I have described, which might be writing a press release, sending out an email for a show, doing the social media stuff, working for the not-for-profits. When I get these obligations out of the way, I go into my studio and start working.

BW: What next for you? And what's next for the New York art world?

DB: I see a lot of activity in the Lower East Side with young dealers opening spaces. I think they would have come to Bushwick if there weren't the Lower East Side. I think the Lower East Side has become the safety belt for young dealers who are not

going to be able to afford Chelsea. They are pushing into Chinatown. There are a lot of young dealers who still work for other dealers who are opening galleries and will represent artists.

I think that artists want to be represented by galleries and people of their generation will want to show the work of their cohorts. Artist run galleries are not going to replace that. We have a really nice alternative here and we're attracting an audience from the highest people in the art world. [Klaus Biesenbach](#) was here during BOS to see the gallery. This means that artist run spaces are interesting, but they are not going to replace commercial galleries.

BW: And your next show is coming up in the Lower East Side?

DB: I am in a group show at [Lesley Heller](#) called "Who." The show is about portraits (this show is currently on now through October 18th). In October, Lesley is taking my work to participate in [Salon Zürcher](#), a side fair during FIAC.

BW: The art world continues to expand on a global basis, yet it's also a fickle market, where both artists and the capital to collect goes from hot to cold and back again. What have you seen?

DB: I have seen two downturns since I have been here, and one lasted a long time in the early 90s. Not many young people experienced that, but it was a terrible time. Many galleries closed and artists had a hard time making a living. Some people say that the art world is now so global it can't collapse since it's standing on the legs of many individuals all over the world. This discussion is over my head!

BW: All the while, the New York art world continues to expand. Where are artists moving to now to create lower cost studios or exhibition spaces?

DB: I know exactly what you mean. If I were starting out, I would go to Cypress Hills or Mott Haven. Artists are there.

Current show at Storefront Ten Eyck

Xiao Fu, "Pixel World," and Justin Cooper, project space, open at Storefront Ten Eyck September 11 and continues on view weekends, 1-6 pm, through October 4