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Big Brash Borough

At the freshened-up Brooklyn Museum, a large, crowded exhibition showed the borough's art scene growing in scale, diversity and ambition.

BY GREGORY VOLK

I'd like to begin with full disclosure. I've lived in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, since 1987, and the Brooklyn ethos—whatever that is—has enormously influenced and inspired me. Long before I began writing about contemporary art, I spent countless hours, day and night, in studios and in bars (Teddy's Bar and Grill, The Ship's Mast—in those days there were just a couple of artists' hangouts), talking shop, talking ideas, talking impassioned plans to make something out of nothing. To be honest, I had little obvious to contribute. I wasn't writing about art, I wasn't a curator and I certainly wasn't a collector. Nor did I know any dealers or collectors in Manhattan. I was just an enthusiastic outsider with laughable gaps in my knowledge, moving (although I didn't know it at the time) from literature to visual art. Someone would mention influences from Judd and I'd be, like, *Judd?*, while someone else would mention Clemente and I'd immediately think of the Pittsburgh Pirates' revered right fielder. Gaps and all, I felt welcomed by artists, and while I was educating myself I was on more or less permanent lookout for wonder, which I often found.

For me, the superheated SoHo of the late 1980s was something else entirely: exotic, flashy, self-important, addled by money and oftentimes annoying. All that posing and posturing, all those idling limousines. What seemed a lot more pertinent to me were the artists who were my neighbors in Williamsburg, working with zeal and belief. Like Manhattan artists of an earlier era, the Brooklynites found unorthodox ways to exhibit their work: in artist-run galleries and temporary spaces in abandoned warehouses, or down at the dilapidated docks. Word traveled. Someone made something that was worth seeing, and you'd see it. There was little obvious hankering for commercial success here, across the river. We found ourselves together in a generous, incubating time, and that was sufficient.

Nina Levy: **Portrait Heads (Matt Freedman, Annie Herron, Jackie Chang, Rico Gatson, John Berens)**, ***2002-04, polyester resin, hydrocal, oil paint, steel, monofilament, slightly smaller than lifesize. Courtesy Metaphor Contemporary and Feigen Contemporary, New York.***

I went to things in Manhattan, of course. It was part of my education. I paid attention, but I nonetheless found myself hightailing it back to Brooklyn, away from all the invisible rules and panoramic hype. When the art market crashed in the early 1990s, much of the glitz evaporated and SoHo became a lot more hospitable. Still, I preferred performances at the Green Room, exhibitions and events at artist-run galleries like Minor Injury and Brand Name Damages, and freewheeling discussions and one-night exhibitions at Four Walls, which doubled as a clubhouse for the Williamsburg scene. Risk and nutrition were in the air, friendship fueled everything, and the whole situation was wonderfully human and refreshingly unpretentious.

When I first began writing about art in 1992—for *Greenline*, a Williamsburg weekly—the most influential art criticism in Manhattan had become ultra-theoretical. French poststructuralism, translated into English a decade or more earlier, had been rerouted in the direction of visual art, and there it often sounded, in poet Randall Jarrell's words, "like something written on a typewriter, by a typewriter." Manhattan was first hijacked by money and then by theory, or so it seemed to me. In Brooklyn, there was little money and plenty of skepticism on the part of very intelligent artists. But the works I encountered were not at all beholden to, or illustrative of, this or that by Foucault, Derrida or Baudrillard.

Keeping It Real

Sometime in the mid-1990s, Manhattan began to discover Brooklyn and to characterize it in language that has pretty much persisted to this day. Brooklyn is "scrappy," "scruffy," "alternative" and ruled by artistic "relationships," as in friends and friends of friends. Attracted in the early days by "low rents," artists had "set up shop" and were making a "vibrant" scene, replete with galleries, restaurants and bars. Like most overviews for tourists, however, this characterization doesn't really get at exactly why the borough has been so fruitful for artists.

I'll hazard a few guesses. In Brooklyn, artists are encouraged to pursue unexpected tangents and to abide in the process, as opposed to angling for the next gig. Much more than in Manhattan, hierarchies are suspended, between older and younger artists, renowned and emerging artists, and artists and art professionals. When stratifications are cleared away, when people aren't decked out in the costume of the hot artist, the important critic, the hip dealer, everything feels a lot more free and unencumbered.

However vital, the scene ultimately depends upon the quality of its art, and Brooklyn has generated some of the liveliest art of the past 15 years. It is extremely varied. Still, I think one can divine some distinctive traits, especially in comparison to Manhattan. To generalize: the

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E.V. Day: G-Force over Brooklyn *(detail), 2004, stretched thong underwear, polyester resin and monofilament. Photo Mauro Restiffe. Courtesy Henry Urbach Architecture, New York.*

Jean Shin: Chance City, *2001, discarded lottery cards, 5 by 8 by 10 feet. Photo Adam Husted. Courtesy Brooklyn Museum.*

Manhattan market tends to encourage and perhaps compel artists to continue working in defined territory. Early John Currin paintings of grotesque women are not all that different from recent John Currin paintings of grotesque women. He may have developed, but there have been no radical shifts in substance or style. The same goes for Elizabeth Peyton, the lauded portraitist, who has been making similar works for the last decade or so; and I'd also say it is true, too, of Matthew Barney. The "Cremaster" cycle can be seen as a kind of niche art in extremis.

By contrast, in the early 1990s, Roxy Paine, a dropout from Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, made a ketchup-flinging device at Brand Name Damages and, at the short-lived but influential Herron Test Site, a column of soap that, when dripped on from a leaking pipe overhead, left an oily film of scum on the floor. Within a few years, such devices had morphed into Paine's acclaimed painting-making and sculpture-producing machines. He was also creating installations of meticulously painted synthetic fungi and plants; and more recently he has produced a series of gleaming metal trees. In the mid-1990s, Ward Shelley was building, among other things, a series of kinetic sculptures incorporating household items. Now in his 50s, Shelley has since made sculptures doubling as living environments, including *Mir* (2001), a rickety rendition of the Russian space station made of found materials, presented at Smack Mellon (a nonprofit exhibition space that also runs a studio program for artists) in the DUMBO (Down Under Manhattan Bridge Overpass) neighborhood; and he continues to escalate his risks, as in a recent installation at Pierogi, where he lived for a month behind the walls, "like a mouse," as he said.

Even Fred Tomaselli, who is probably the preeminent painter to have emerged from Brooklyn, has gone through his own changes. In the late '80s he was making offbeat installations, including one on the floor in the basement at P.S. 1, in which Styrofoam cups strung on threads and blown by two fans looked like ocean whitecaps. When he returned to painting, his works were often highly patterned, incorporating over-the-counter and prescription pills (for instance, columns of aspirins) neatly sealed behind layers of highly polished resin. This became a signature style for several years. Today, his intricate collages are wide-ranging: teeming landscapes and abstractions, figures composed of representations of packed-together body parts, nature vignettes suggesting 19th-century folk art. He also creates conceptual works involving the juxtaposition of systems of information.

Many of the best artists to emerge from Brooklyn display this tendency toward diversity—Eve Sussman, for example, whose video *89 Seconds at Alcazar*, an in-motion tableau vivant of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, was highly regarded at this year's Whitney Biennial. Yet Sussman has long been engaged, as well, with architectural interventions and experimental, decidedly nontheatrical videos. A sense of more or less permanent discovery is integral to art-making in Brooklyn and is a big reason for the "vibrancy" of its "scruffy" and "alternative" scene.

Fresh Contexts

The recent exhibition "Open House: Working in Brooklyn," curated by Charlotta Kotik and Tumelo Mosaka at the Brooklyn Museum, heralded the recently renovated institution's exciting new incarnation (complete with a gleaming entranceway designed by Polshek Partnership Architects) as it shifts its orientation to an expanding local audience. The museum has begun dealing seriously with Brooklyn artists, from those who enjoy visible careers at prominent galleries to others just emerging: hip-hop disciples from Fort Greene, diverse expatriates who have settled in the borough, or experimental youth, fresh out of art school, founding new outposts in Greenpoint, East Williamsburg and Bushwick. "Open House" achieved a wider representation of the borough's sundry neighborhoods and esthetics than has ever before been attempted in smaller surveys and group shows on the theme, both here and abroad.

The exhibition reflected an art milieu that has grown significantly in the past six years. In Williamsburg, long-running venues like Pierogi, Roebling Hall, Schroeder Romero, Momenta and the itinerant galley called eyewash have been joined by many others, including Priska Juschka Fine Art, Bellwether (which recently moved to Chelsea), Black and White, Jack the Pelican, Parker's Box, Holland Tunnel, Southfirst and *sixtyseven. Bedford-Stuyvesant's Skylight Gallery is a showcase for mostly black artists, as is the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art, which is slated to move to Fort Greene this month. In DUMBO, Smack Mellon and the DUMBO Arts Center are part of an eclectic scene including galleries, performance venues and arts organizations, while Red Hook is home to the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition and the Kentler International Drawing Space. Curators Kotik and Mosaka contacted many of these venues, asking for recommendations, and they

Right, Leonardo Drew: Number 90, *2004, glass, wood and cast paper, 12½ by 19 by 2½ feet. Photo Adam Husted. Courtesy Brooklyn Museum.*

Below, Patricia Cronin: Memorial to a Marriage, *2001-04, bronze, 17 by 53 by 27 inches. Photo Adam Husted. Courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.*

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sent and past, consciousness and memory. Roxy Paine's *Amanita Virosa Wall (Large) #2* (2001) consisted of a loose arrangement of faux poisonous mushrooms, seductive yet dangerous, made out of synthetic materials and then painted to look real. A mural by Elana Herzog was made by stapling a red chenille bedspread to a Sheetrock wall, then obsessively pulling it apart into sections that nonetheless retain the spread's overall design (*Untitled No. 1*, 2002). James Hyde's eye-catching *Return* (2003), a 200-inch-long stretch of striped nylon beach-chair webbing, delicately curling at its edges, is a kind of abstract painting sans paint. A large, site-specific wall painting by Lisa Sigal looked almost like an architectural ruin, with portions projecting sculpturally off the wall.

Some of the best sculptures, too, were fecund, even outrageously so. Jean Shin's *Chance City* (2001-04) is a fragile construction of more than $20,000 worth of discarded lottery tickets, and that's a lot of losing tickets. The tickets are carefully stacked to form a compound house of cards, recalling both modern cityscapes and pagodas in over-the-top lotto colors. Linda Ganjian created an ornate rug of hundreds of colorful doodads attached to a white pile rug covering a pedestal, updating the tradition of Armenian carpets with vivid pop touches like those on a decorated cake (*It Must Have Been a Happy Time*, 2003). Lorenzo Pace's installation—involving a wall painting, a children's book, and a white picket fence and stuffed animals on the floor—extends a family history back to slavery and Reconstruction. It turns the remembrance of servitude into a liberating force (*Jalani and the Lock: Family History Tree*, 2004). Leonardo Drew's paper casts of urban detritus in wood and glass cases, stacked to form a looming wall, make junk seem like rare historical treasures (*Number 90*, 2004); while Yoko Inoue's bewildering assortment of found and cast figurines, bottles, hats, airplanes, guns and cheap souvenirs is assembled like a shrine (*Transmigration of the SOLD*, 2004).

Jack Risley's three upright mops connected by a duct system made of metal and felt, a mutant cleaning device that couldn't possibly get the job done (*Undone Again*, 2001), was one of the more pared-down sculptures in the show. Ward Shelley was represented by a colorful vendor's cart from which he and his collaborators have dispensed Rice Krispies Treats in the streets of Williamsburg (*Vendor*, 2004). The Plexiglas-paneled cart is fitted with, among other things, wooden toys, kitchen implements, red and yellow neon lights, and several videos chronicling its sojourn in the streets. On view elsewhere was Shelley's *Williamsburg Timeline* (2002), a lithograph charting the evolution of the neighborhood's art scene in loving detail.

From Politics to Play

Large-scale media installations were scarce in "Open House," perhaps due to spatial constraints. An exception was Stephen Dean's DVD video projection of crowds at World Cup soccer games (*Volta*, 2002), in which fans stand en masse to lustily cheer, hoist giant-sized banners, dance, groan and cavort—depending on their team's fortunes. Dan Devine conflated nature and culture in a large chandelier made of crystals, brass dinosaur bones, tiny video monitors and surveillance cameras (*Material from Grasshopper Brains Can Self-Assemble into Computer Sensors*, 2003-04). More typical were works playing on individual monitors. Kate Gilmore showed a hilarious yet somewhat disturbing video of a woman (herself) wearing a slinky black cocktail dress and black stockings, ready to go out except for one problem: her foot is stuck in a pail, immobilized in what seems to be plaster or concrete (*My Love Is an Anchor*, 2004). Futilely, she hammers and tugs at the pail, and grows frustrated and sooty—a metaphor, perhaps, of love troubles mixed with creative block. In Jennifer and Kevin McCoy's video installation *The Kiss* (2002), a woman and man kiss ad infinitum as they shift about in a herky-jerky fashion reminiscent of robots or computer games. Sadly tucked away in a basementlike covert more fit for buckets and mops than video was Oliver Herring's piece showing various people performing staccato, often speeded-up elemental actions (*Basic*, 2002). Perry Hoberman showed an ever-changing data-filled monitor (*Your Time Is Valuable*, 2003) calculating how long you've been watching it and how much time you save in comparison with watching a 10-minute video. Hoberman questions the role of art in an era of accelerated time, vast information and short attention spans.

Many Brooklyn artists take an unflinching look at world events and domestic issues. Emily Jacir's

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Detail of Marc Lepson's* Breathe: A Meditation on Claustrophobia, Confinement and Comfort, *2002, screenprint on paper, 100 by 114 inches. Courtesy M.Y. Art Prospects.

Jane Fine:* Battlefield No. 3, *2003, acrylic and ink on wood, 42 by 57 inches. Courtesy Pierogi.

Linda Ganjian:* It Must Have Been a Happy Time, *2003, polymer clay, carpet, varnish and glue on wood pedestal, 30 by 84 by 60 inches. Courtesy eyewash gallery, Brooklyn.