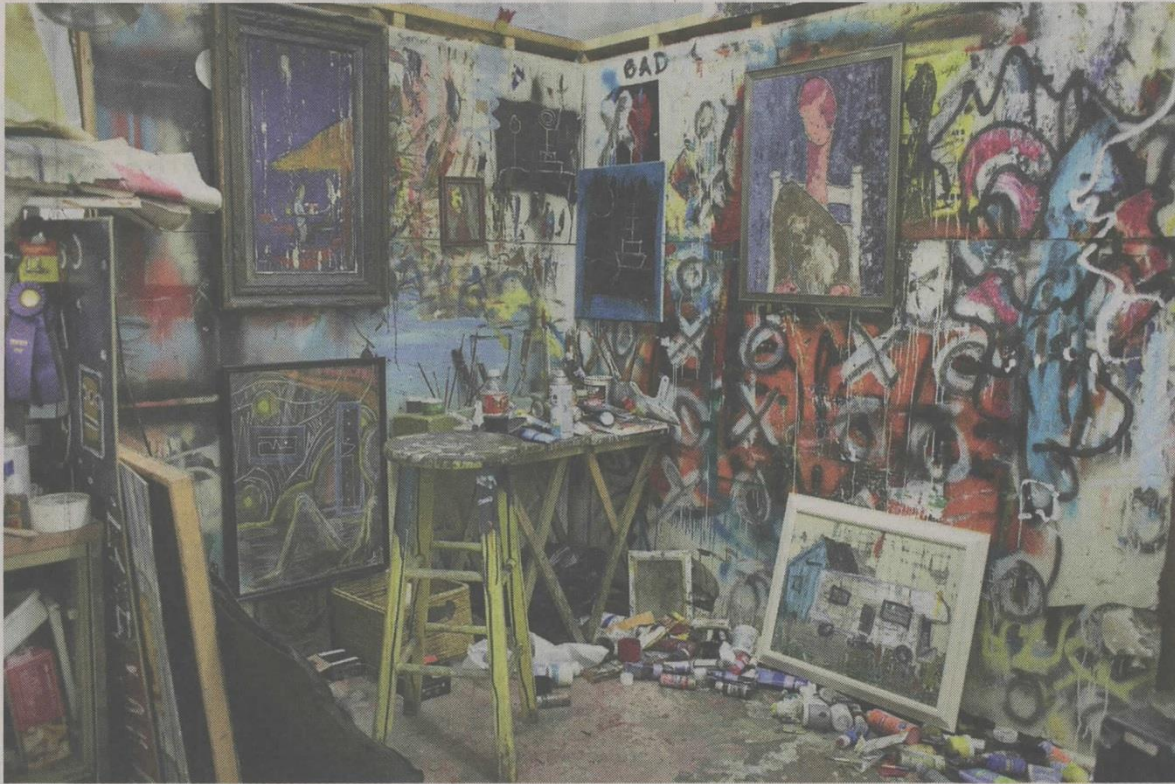


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CITY NEWS



URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

Exploring the Queens Art Scene



A superstorm Sandy-damaged artists' studio, top, was reassembled at the Conception Gallery in Long Island City. Below, 'And the Buddha Cries,' is at the Conception Gallery as well. MoMA PS1, above, also in LIC.



When you think of the New York City art scene—at least when I think of the New York City art scene—Chelsea and the Lower East Side come to mind. And maybe Brooklyn, but that's mostly because Brooklyn seems to have cornered the market on cutting edge.

But what about Queens, several of whose cultural destinations I visited last week. And if so, can the Bronx be far behind? And since artists, seeking cheap living and studio space, traditionally herald the arrival of the next hip neighborhood, does that mean I should buy a one-bedroom in East Elmhurst while prices are still affordable? Or is it already too late?

These were some of the concerns that came to mind as I stood before "Misappropriation of a Modern Artifact" at the Conception Gallery in Long Island City's Falchi Building.

If I hadn't been warned of the installation's iconographic significance by curator Rachel Wilkins-Blum I might have dismissed it as a shack standing in the middle of an art gallery. Or a large, overlooked pile of junk. And I wouldn't have been far off the mark.

Ms. Wilkins-Blum explained that the work is the reassembled studio of artists Eddie Rehm and Ken Husband, destroyed by superstorm Sandy. "People have been moved by it," the curator reported. "A couple of people have walked in and been moved emotionally to tears."

To be honest, I had a hard time distinguishing Sandy damage from the creative chaos of a typical artist's studio. I assume the tubes of

paint spread across the floor were storm-related, but what of the graffiti on the walls?

Not to take anything away from their loss. But is it possible Messrs. Rehm and Husband aren't two of the tidiest individuals? "I had to reprimand them a couple of times for trying to smoke in here," Ms. Wilkins-Blum confided.

Was there anything about the piece that could only, or best, have been produced in Queens, other than the fact that the gallery seems to have lots of space? The show "Brink," of which "Misappropriation" is but one of many pieces, is really just a placeholder until the landlord finds a paying tenant, such as Juice Press, the raw-juice and smoothie company, whose production facility sits in the Falchi Building's lobby.

And how hard is it to get



the art crowd to visit Queens? "Obviously, you've not got the everyday foot traffic," Ms. Wilkins-Blum stated. "But the people we've got out here have actually come here with a vested interest in seeing these artists."

My next stop was the SculptureCenter, a few minutes car ride away. Its current exhibition is called "Puddle, Pot-hole, Portal," which inaugurates the contemporary-sculpture institution's newly expanded and renovated building.

"A lot of work was made on-site," said Ben Whine, the organization's associate director, as we stood in a gallery roughly the height of an airplane hangar. Perhaps what distinguishes Queens art is that it offers room for artists to think big.

But there were also delicate works on paper by New Yorker cartoonist Saul Steinberg, "on what would have been his 100th birthday," Mr. Whine noted.

His art was apparently in keeping with the show's theme, though the connection didn't leap out at me. "There's a lot of puddles," Mr. Whine said as we stood before 1974's "Rainbow Reflected."

So there were.

My final stop was MoMA PS1, the contemporary-art space, which I'm almost embarrassed to admit I've never visited before. These days any self-respecting museum has a world-class gift shop and PS1's didn't disappoint.

I was particularly smitten by a holiday-season snow globe that featured a red-lettered expletive and nothing else. But after anguishing over which of my grown children would most appreciate it, I reluctantly decided to forgo the purchase.

Walking through PS1's courtyard on the way to the

gallery I spotted a series of dumpsters with the words "Throw Your Art Away" written across them. "The idea is you're purging yourself of art work you're ashamed of," explained Zachary Bowman, the institution's director of visitor services.

The dumpsters are themselves part of an artwork—"Art Amnesty"—by a British artist who goes by the name Bob and Roberta Smith.

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But given the contemporary-art scene's seeming immunity to mortification, I wondered how often the dumpsters needed to be emptied. For example, I was escorted to the boiler room of the 19th century public-school building that has been converted to gallery space, the mammoth boiler having been gilded in gold by artist Saul Melman. "Using semen, sweat and blood," Mr. Bowman revealed. "Probably say bodily fluids."

Our final stop was the roof, which boasts a restaurant in more clement weather. As he stood framed by the evening Manhattan skyline just across the East River, Mr. Bowman predicted big things for Queens. "People don't realize that Long Island City is part of Queens, and Queens is so accessible to Manhattan," he explained. "We will see so much more of an influx of artists in the next five years. It's already happening."

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