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Artists fret as tourists beat a path to their studios

Will notice force Mott Haven rents up and them out?

by Azriel James Relph

“Ask about my art, not my rent” reads the sign posted at the door to Edwin Gonzalez’s apartment on Third Avenue and East 134th Street.

As Gonzalez pours wine and fixes lunch for friends and visitors who wander in for the third annual Mott Haven Open Artist Studio Tour, Melissa Calderon, one of the artists displaying paintings, photographs and sculpture in Gonzalez’s studio, explains the sign. “Last year people kept asking ‘What do you pay?’” she says.

This year they hoped the art alone would be the center of attention, but in a place like Mott Haven, the conversation inevitably turns to the neighborhood itself.



Luis Nieves painting outside Carey Clark’s Mott Haven studio.

Calderon – who has a solo show in June at the Longwood Art Gallery at Hostos Community College – used to have a studio of her own in Mott Haven. She had to move to Norwood when the rents shot up.

“Artists come here for a year or two and have to leave,” she laments. “There is a history that is totally gone, but those of us who remember hold the torch.”

Despite the rising cost of space in the area, Mott Haven remains an attractive place for artists to work, as evidenced by the many studios open during the May 2nd tour put together by the Bronx Council on the Arts. The Bronx Culture Trolley ferried visitors to more than 15 studios and galleries.

Gonzalez, whose work depicts mythological figures like fairies, points out what makes the area so attractive to artists: “There are less distractions than places like Williamsburg, which I appreciate.”

“If you are a Bronx artist,” agrees Calderon, “you are here because you’re working – not because there is a scene here.”

The comparisons and contrasts to Williamsburg continue a couple of blocks away in the shared studio of the newlywed artists Darcy Dahl and Beth Brideau, above the Bruckner Bar and Grill.

“I wanted a nice quiet spot that’s not Williamsburg,” says Brideau. “On Sunday it’s quiet here.”

At the same time, Brideau – who has been working in the studio for five years on sculptures based on topographical images of forests, and who has a piece on display at the Museum of Modern Art– sees the other side of the coin: once a neighborhood becomes “this hip place where you’ve got to be,” she warns, “they raise the rents and then no one can live here.”

In a way, Dahl’s paintings reflect the changing neighborhood. He says his pieces are never finished, and he constantly adds new colors and shapes to them. He also projects videos with abstract images in pulsating kaleidoscopic loops, as in the three-month show he had at the Bronx Museum of Art.

A Dahl piece – like the neighborhood where he created it – never looks the same as it did the last time you saw it. “Everything has to do with context and the situation of the moment,” he says.

For this couple, the situation of the moment led them to begin to share their tiny studio space when they got married a year ago. They could no longer afford their own separate work spaces –even in the South Bronx.

Gerhard Frommel, an Austrian artist who has been in New York for eight years, had a hard time finding a place he could afford anywhere in the city. “The spaces I was offered as art studios in Mott Haven were more expensive than Manhattan,” he exclaims. “People are really greedy here.”

After two years of searching, Frommel finally walked up to some ironworkers to ask if they knew of any affordable work space. They pointed him toward a large brick warehouse near the mouth of the Third Avenue Bridge, where, in a piano repair shop, he created a tiny studio reached by a meandering path outlined by hundreds of dust-collecting and broken pianos.

“I didn’t find the space, the space found me,” he says, as he shows visitors his technique for mixing the paints he uses for his abstract works.

Up the street, Francisco Vallejo and Louis Nieves – two artists from Hunts Point – look up from the easels they have set up on the sidewalk.

“SoHo is no longer the sole owner of the art scene,” says Vallejo. The South Bronx art community, he says, has “been here a while, but it hasn’t gotten the attention it deserves.”

He acknowledges the double-edged sword of getting that attention however, noting, “It’s gonna displace people.” “It’s the beginning of the end,” Nieves agrees. “Gentrification is coming.”

But Carey Clark, visual arts director at The Point Community Development Corporation in Hunts Point and a Mott Haven resident who also opened her studio for the day, says it’s more complicated than that. She argues that real estate speculators, not artists, cause displacement. The only fault she finds with artists is their tendency to keep to themselves.

“Artists get the label of the first wave of gentrifiers because they don’t get involved in the communities they work in enough,” she says.

Back at the Bruckner Bar and Grill, in a gallery behind the bar, two visiting artists from the North Bronx also try to wrap their heads around what is happening in Mott Haven.

Ira Merritt and Aaron Olshan, from Amalgamated Houses in Van Cortland Village, have had their work on display in Mott Haven since March. They were surprised by what they found.

“It used to be rougher here – let’s put it that way,” says Merritt.

Still, he added, the reputation of the South Bronx hasn’t caught up with reality. When we had our opening, a lot of people we thought would come stayed away,” says Merritt with a note of disappointment in his voice. ■