

Golden Rule

A new gallery in Bed-Stuy provides context for the artists who are creating the neighborhood's art scene.

BY JASMIN HERNANDEZ

PORTRAIT BY DEANA LAWSON



Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels also curates her gallery's shop, which includes zines, editions and books.

Situated on Nostrand Avenue in the Bedford-Stuyvesant

section of Brooklyn, We Buy Gold, a recently opened gallery, beckons its audience with a flashy Cash For Gold neon sign. We Buy Gold cleverly plays on pawn shop iconography while further exploring the meanings of art and commerce. “It’s rooted in thinking about value, and it felt to me like something that is really multi-layered,” explains founder Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels. “On the one hand it was kind of funny and cheeky, but also it was just real DIY. Just thinking about something that you see all over the place—especially centralized in areas that aren’t wealthy.”

To wit, pawn shops, bodegas, beauty salons and liquor stores, have long been communal and institutional spaces which represent survival and daily life in low-income communities. We Buy Gold serves this same purpose as a cultural hub for the many thinkers, culture-makers and artists of color that reside in this area. In an ever-gentrifying Bedford-Stuyvesant, We Buy Gold aims to be the cultural connector and bridge-builder between the neighborhood’s long-standing residents and the new demographic quickly settling in. “I was thinking about exchange, ownership, agency, community participation and artists just selling things that they make, and what that means,” says Bellorado-Samuels. “How they exist in the world as these providers of content and culture in this very opaque art world. How to think about how we value artworks and also how we value people and how we value culture that is being created, and who gets to kind of steer that ship.”

We Buy Gold opened its doors in mid-March to an outpouring of 300 guests including fellow artists and friends such as Derrick Adams and Deana Lawson. A local restaurateur provided light bites and post-reception cocktails ensued at a bar a few doors down, which speaks to its mission of seamlessly embedding itself into the community. “I have no connection to Chinatown or the Lower East Side,” explains Bellorado-Samuels. “Why not do it here in Bed-Stuy? Most artists I know live here; writers, curators, this place is bubbling over with art workers in every capacity.”

The inaugural exhibit, “ONE”—a group show featuring Renee Gladman, Torkwase Dyson and Harold Mendez, American artists hailing from different parts of the U.S.—deals with migration, geography and race. “All three of them are attacking ideas around space, geographic space, physical space in different but really intersectional ways,” says Bellorado-Samuels. “I like the idea that they’re coming at it from these different angles.”

Gladman, a prose writer, imagines words and sentences as architecture and delicately presents a poetic angst in her ink on paper works. Dyson’s quiet and sleek abstract paintings and sculptures explore the black body and finding personal agency. While Mendez, a Latinx artist of Colombian and Mexican descent, and currently in this year’s Whitney Biennial, delves into transnational identity and history in his sculptures sourced from found materials. There is a sophisticated colorway linking all of these works, the dark, almost black pieces hang on white walls, complemented by grey flooring. “I like how one kind of leads into the other,” says Bellorado-Samuels. This is also a reflection of Bellorado-Samuels’ own style, including her signature thick black frames.

Bellorado-Samuels sits atop an advantageous perch in the art world: she is the director of both the Jack Shainman Gallery, whose roster boasts Nick Cave and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye and For Freedoms, the first artist-run super PAC aimed at fostering political change through the visual arts. “Joeonna has executed her vision at such a high level. I recognize the amount of foresight, ambition, and hard work necessary to pull that off and I am deeply impressed,” says Jack Shainman. “The way We Buy Gold embeds itself within the neighborhood in this iteration is very thoughtful, and I am so glad for her success.”

We Buy Gold is a homegrown endeavor spearheaded by Bellorado-Samuels—who has lived in Bedford-Stuyvesant for nearly a decade—and her partner Aryn DrakeLee, an art patron and collector whom she met in San Francisco when they were children. “It’s really wonderful to sit here and talk to my neighbors. I get to know this block and this village and I feel really honored to be able to do that.”

Upcoming exhibitions pick up where “ONE” left off: “TWO” will include *Passage*, a video work by Mohau Modisakeng that is currently on view at the South African Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, and works by Dineo Seshee Bopape. “THREE: On Visibility and Camouflage,” will feature five artists from the Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter collective, investigating black female subjectivity and visibility.

The Yard, We Buy Gold’s outdoor space, features a politically themed installation by Carver Audain, as well as Alexandra Bell’s *A Teenager With Promise*, a poster honoring slain teen Michael Brown from her *Counternarratives* series, which manipulates and challenges the constant toxic media coverage of people of color.