

ART & DESIGN | ART TREK

# Pluralism, With Bug Zappers and Doll People

A Critic's Guide to the Best of the Lower East Side

By KEN JOHNSON APRIL 3, 2014

WHEN the New Museum announced plans in 2002 to move from SoHo to the Bowery, on the Lower East Side, it caused much head scratching in the New York art world. With only about a half-dozen galleries there — a decidedly not chic mix of small businesses and industry and tenement housing — it seemed a strange decision to venture so far off the scene's usual map.

How times have changed. Now the Lower East Side is home to more than 100 galleries. With the neighborhood's myriad boutiques and restaurants, gentrification has prevailed. You don't find here the shows of blue-chip artists like Richard Serra and Jeff Koons, but what you'll see generally reflects the pluralistic mix you'd see in Chelsea or in big art fairs like the Armory Show.

Has the Lower East Side reached a tipping point? Surely it's a sign of something that the behemoth Gagosian Gallery opened a pop-up branch on Thursday night with a show of sculptures by the Swiss art star Urs Fischer, in a former bank building at 104 Delancey Street, at Ludlow Street.

The district's galleries are spread out mainly within a seven-by-nine-block rectangle between the East Village and Chinatown. The rectangle is bordered by East Houston to the north, Canal to the south, the Bowery to the west and Clinton Street to the east. The following selection of galleries begins in the northeast corner.

**PARTICIPANT INC.** Before he turned into a highly regarded

filmmaker, Luther Price studied sculpture at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. There, he produced the grisly, politically incendiary works on view in this nonprofit space, one of the area's oldest galleries still functioning. Most striking are groups of gray, emaciated, life-size figures missing limbs, looking as if they'd been dug up from a mass grave in some war zone. This show, "The Years Made Flies," departs with unusual ferocity from the district's general run of market-friendly art.

**RACHEL UFFNER** If you like painting, you must see Joanne Greenbaum's rousing show. Using oil and acrylic paints, pencils, crayons and various markers, Ms. Greenbaum has produced abstract compositions of infectiously joyous, improvisational panache. An underlying grid is the foundation for layered networks of curvy and straight lines, gaudy organic forms, showers of dribbled paint and areas of furious scribbling. The paintings teeter between order and chaos, harmony and dissonance, beauty and ugliness. There's a visionary aspect, as if they were made under the guidance of some cosmic consciousness. Ms. Greenbaum, 60, has been working in this vein for nearly three decades, and she's now operating at the top of her game.

**THIERRY GOLDBERG** Looking at Stas Volovik's small, abstract paintings, you might guess that they were made in the 1930s by a previously unknown follower of Kandinsky's late work. Circles, triangles, rectangles and stripes are realized in muted colors that look as if they had faded from their original brightness. Scuff marks and abraded areas add to that impression of antiquity. It turns out, however, that Mr. Volovik is a contemporary painter who lives in Frechen, Germany, just outside Cologne. He's a slyly playful postmodernist. You'll notice an anthropomorphic aspect to many pictures, which suggest comically abstracted faces and figures. His paintings are smart, subtly funny and poetically beguiling.

**LAUREL GITLEN** Corin Hewitt's magical show consists of two nearly identical small, life-size buildings. Each painted wood-and-stucco construction is a realistic rendering of an old, closed storefront, like those you might find in an upstate town left far behind by modern times. Incongruously, each has attached to its side a new sign that says "police." Closer examination reveals puzzling details, like flattened makeup boxes

and real pancakes (the kind you eat). Within the glassed-in display areas of each, a monitor shows live feeds from surveillance cameras trained on the interior studs and panels. But there are no rooms beyond the papered-over front doors. There's an enigmatic, dreamlike quality to the whole installation, and it's tinged by an affecting sadness.

**THE ARTIST'S INSTITUTE** Entering this basement gallery, a nonprofit space sponsored by Hunter College, you find what seems to be an empty room. In fact, the French artist Pierre Huyghe has introduced curious things. They include two live spiders, now dwelling near the ceiling, and an artwork by the sculptor Fernando Ortega: a bug zapper wired to switch off the gallery lights when it electrocutes a fly. Also, a hole drilled into the concrete floor has been treated with rat pheromones, the idea being that urban rodents will be enticed to enter. This prompts thought about how we routinely categorize what belongs inside and what outside.

**SALON 94 BOWERY** Laurie Simmons has been using photography to investigate stereotypical representations of femininity for many years. The large, glossy color photographs in "Kigurumi, Dollers and How We See" picture unknown people in costumes with whole-head masks that make them resemble big-eyed, teenage-girl dolls. Kigurumi is a subgenre of Japanese "cosplay" (costume play). Shot in the oddly diminutive rooms of a derelict house, the photographs create an intriguing tension between reality and fantasy.

**MIGUEL ABREU** Not to take anything away from the Austrian painter Florian Pumhösl's intensely cerebral works, but the best reason to see his exhibition is to behold Miguel Abreu's gorgeous new fourth-floor gallery in an old industrial building on Eldridge Street. Stretching an entire block, from Eldridge to Allen Street, it calls to mind the loft-style galleries of SoHo during the art market boom of the 1980s. Complementing the gallery's ethereally minimal architecture, Mr. Pumhösl's 12 paintings consist of thin brick-red lines printed on white ceramic panels. Each is based on a map created by a 19th-century European rabbi — more of a geometrically abstracted diagram, actually — of Israel. Mr. Pumhösl's reasons for drawing inspiration from such an unlikely artifact remain obscure, but it's interesting to ponder the connections between two myth-

saturated realms: that of the Holy Land and that of high art.

**SIMON PRESTON** This storefront gallery has a modern glass and metal facade with double doors. From the street, you see an actual-size, free-standing reproduction of that structure. Behind that, inside the gallery, you come upon a third facade of the same dimensions, made of unpainted plywood sheets with a padlock securing its doors. Finally, farthest back, there's a stretched linen canvas of the same dimensions on which the outlines of the facade are delineated in pencil. All of this is the work of Hans Schabus, an Austrian conceptualist. The story is that Mr. Schabus ordered the gallery to remove and transport its actual facade to Florida for the Art Basel Miami Beach fair in December. The plywood construction was installed as a temporary replacement. Then he ordered an entirely new glass and metal front — the one now facing the street. The construction indoors that you thought was a reproduction is, in fact, the original front. Mr. Schabus's mind game of a show is a remarkably elegant demonstration of the differences between realities and simulations and their tendency to collapse in contemporary experience.

**JACK HANLEY** Meredith James's exhibition "Land Lock" starts with an upward-sloping checkerboard floor, whose red and white tiles increase in size toward the gallery's far end, reversing the usual perspective. Having traversed this dizzying incline, you pass through one of two curtained doorways into a dark room where you may watch "Delmar," a 44-minute video play projected on three screens. With its fanciful costumes, cartoonish theatrical sets and fairy tale plot, it's like a medieval triptych psychoanalytically updated and brought to life.

**POCKET UTOPIA** This tiny gallery operated by Austin Thomas is oriented to a populist, artist-centered philosophy. Its current show by Summer Wheat, "Everything Under the Sun: Moon and Stars," is a dense, colorful installation of domestic objects crudely recreated in a plethora of materials. Obscurely related to Vermeer's "The Milkmaid," it all looks as if it had been taken out of the home of a busily creative hippie.

### **DON'T MISS**

At Kerry Schuss, 34 Orchard Street, at Stanton Street: "Half Drop," a group show. At Canada, 333 Broome Street, at Bowery: "The Weird Show,"

with assemblages, sculpture and a trippy 3-D video by Willy Le Maitre. At Lehmann Maupin, 201 Chrystie Street, at Stanton Street: Klara Kristalova's big, hand-painted ceramic figures.

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### **Yum. Porridge.**

**CONGEE VILLAGE AND CONGEE BOWERY** These Cantonese restaurants are no place to unwind, with their crowds, hyperactive décor and epic-length menus. But they are the place for congee, bowls of deeply savory rice porridge. They're all cheap enough to justify a splurge on geoduck sashimi. 100 Allen Street, at Delancey Street; 212-941-1818. 207 Bowery, at Rivington Street; 212-766-2828, [congeevillagerestaurants.com](http://congeevillagerestaurants.com).

*PETE WELLS*

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*Many galleries here are open Wednesday through Sunday.*

**THE ARTIST'S INSTITUTE** 163 Eldridge Street, between Delancey and Rivington Streets; [theartistsinstitute.org](http://theartistsinstitute.org).

**JACK HANLEY GALLERY** 327 Broome Street, between Chrystie Street and the Bowery; [jackhanley.com](http://jackhanley.com).

**LAUREL GITLEN GALLERY** 122 Norfolk Street, at Rivington Street; [laurelgitlen.com](http://laurelgitlen.com).

**MIGUEL ABREU GALLERIES** 88 Eldridge Street, between Canal and Hester Streets; [miguelabreugallery.com](http://miguelabreugallery.com).

**PARTICIPANT INC.** 253 East Houston Street, near Norfolk Street; [participantinc.org](http://participantinc.org).

**POCKET UTOPIA** 191 Henry Street, between Clinton and Jefferson Streets; [pocketutopia.com](http://pocketutopia.com).

**RACHEL UFFNER GALLERY** 170 Suffolk Street, between East Houston and Stanton Streets; [racheluffnergallery.com](http://racheluffnergallery.com).

**SALON 94 BOWERY** 243 Bowery, near Chrystie Street; [salon94.com](http://salon94.com).

**SIMON PRESTON GALLERY** 301 Broome Street, between Forsyth and Eldridge Streets; [simonprestongallery.com](http://simonprestongallery.com).

**THIERRY GOLDBERG** 103 Norfolk Street, between Delancey and Rivington Streets; [thierrygoldberg.com](http://thierrygoldberg.com).

## Restaurant guidance provided by Pete Wells.

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