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Chasing a Dream and an Unalloyed Ethos

A Critic's Picks in Brooklyn, an Embattled Utopia

By Martha Schwendener April 3, 2014

ARRIVE in Brooklyn, and you've entered the belly of contemporary art. It's our 19th-century Paris or 18th-century Rome, with one of the largest concentrations of artists in the world. Here, you'll find both commercial galleries and nonprofit and artist-run spaces — and thousands upon thousands of places you can visit during open-studio weekends scattered throughout the year.

Yet Brooklyn is an embattled utopia. In 2002 the artist Ward Shelley created a seven-foot-long timeline, now owned by the Brooklyn Museum, that set the “golden age” of Williamsburg in the early 1990s and its era of “consolidation and professionalism” around 2000. Now we're in the artisanal cocktails-and-condominium afterlife.

It's a well-known progression: Artists gentrify neighborhoods, only to be forced out by rising rents as these areas attract restaurants, upscale shops and people who covet the lifestyle rather than the studio space. That's happening here, and some fear that even the artist-run spaces contribute to this process. (Martha Rosler reflects on the complicity of artists in that regard in her 2013 book, “Culture Class,” echoing observations by other veteran Brooklyn creative types, like the filmmaker Spike Lee.)

And yet, cognizant that despite its complications, Brooklyn is still a mecca, young artists continue to arrive, chasing the bohemian dream out to Bushwick and a handful of other neighborhoods. Here's a selective gallery goer's guide.

WILLIAMSBURG/GREENPOINT

REAL FINE ARTS Up the way in Greenpoint is Real Fine Arts, a small gallery that harks back to that golden age of Williamsburg but also draws inspiration from artist-run spaces like Orchard and Reena Spaulings on the Lower East Side. Started by two Pratt Institute graduates, Ben Morgan-Cleveland and Tyler Dobson, the gallery tends to show the work of friends like Ned Vena, whose current “Paintings Without Borders,” all in the shape of the letter G (like the nearby G train, perhaps), suggest Frank Stella's shaped paintings, or graphic design. Emblematic of the gallery's subtle disruptions of white-cube protocol, the floor is currently covered with black anti-fatigue rubber, a comfortable surface that eases the labor of looking at art.