

## From Freight Handlers to Fine Art

Once an industrial section of cold cement warehouses and rusting rail yards with a flurry of yellow taxicabs passing through, Chelsea now sparkles with art galleries, trendy new restaurants and its first expensive residential explosion. The conversion has been gradual with an unusual symbiotic relationship between the industrial and the art mart.

The photography gallery of Yossi Milo exists upstairs from a taxi garage. The PaceWildenstein's Minimalist mausoleum on West 25th is down the street from old artist's coops. Elite art collectors rub shoulders with auto mechanics as they walk through the streets. But despite this unusual relationship, after more than ten years of growth, the Chelsea neighborhood possesses more than 250 galleries that extend from West 13th to West 29th Streets and from 10th Avenue to the West Side Highway in Manhattan, about twice the amount of galleries SoHo had in the early 1990's.

The migration to Chelsea is a large scale New York City event that has never happened before. All species of art galleries exist in Chelsea in different stages of development. Its crop of galleries consists of parallel realities catering to different audiences and markets from the avant-garde to the academic. With art from places as far as India and as close as Williamsburg, Chelsea reflects contemporary art's global marketplace.

"Chelsea is now the dominant marketplace for art culture in New York," said Renee Vara, an Adjunct Professor at New York University and Lecturer at Guggenheim Museum, where she teaches art history, art theory, and museum studies, and is a private independent curator and art historian. "It offers efficiency and a separate enclave with a collective and attractive element."

The breakthrough into Chelsea began in 1988 with the opening of the Dia Foundation, now Dia Center for the Arts. This cultural pioneer set up camp in a vicinity where spaces were large and rents were cheap. By late 1994, Matthew Marks, then a young Upper East Side dealer, expanded to West 22nd Street and started the "art party scene" in the new neighborhood. At the time, it was impossible to predict how Chelsea would be transformed or how fast changes would happen.

Paula Cooper arrived in 1996. Cooper had opened SoHo's first art gallery in 1968 and then joined about 15 other art dealers and moved to far west Chelsea. The space in Chelsea opened in an old garage on West 21st Street, between 10th and 11th avenues. Because of Cooper's prominence in the art world and her role in developing SoHo, many art and real estate entrepreneurs took her move as a sign that the neighborhood west of 10th Avenue and bound by 20th and 26th streets was about to be transformed.

The transformation of Chelsea was the answer for rents that had spiraled out of control in SoHo. With most galleries renting and not owning their spaces in SoHo, galleries sought out new ventures in other territories where rents were cheaper or the option of owning a building was presented. The idea of Chelsea was ripe for its time when the art world was ready to break old traditions with SoHo. They found them in Chelsea.

As Chelsea dominated the art scene, Mary Boone signaled another stage in her personal evolution as a dealer by establishing a Chelsea branch of her high profile gallery. Gluckman Mayner Architects created a dramatic Chelsea gallery for Boone. Richard Gluckman's association with Boone dates back to her days on West Broadway. He also designed her gallery at 745 Fifth Avenue.

Boone opened her first space in SoHo on Broadway in 1979 moving into the same building that housed Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend's legendary galleries. Boone later looked for space on 57th Street in the traditional neighborhood of the New York art world.

The layout and details of the Chelsea gallery originated from the design of her uptown space. The architect created a powerful juxtaposition between the details associated with his work and the rugged quality of original wood trusses and wood plank ceiling, which are exposed arcing over the space. The floors are steel-troweled concrete slab, which mimics the floor treatment uptown. And the facade's storefront of translucent glass reminds one of Gluckman's design at Boone's West Broadway gallery. In Chelsea, all three rooms receive natural light by way of the translucent storefront windows in the reception area and through a small central skylight in the rear. The 12-ft.-wide main exhibition area contains a translucent skylight that traverses the entire length of the 24-ft.-high display wall. Spotlights provide additional lighting.

As the Chelsea area continued to transform, people moved into the area's first pricey loft conversion on West 22nd Street. Savanna Partners, a young real estate development firm, bought that property at a July 1994 auction for \$3 million. Because of zoning requirements, it took Savanna Partners one and a half years to get approvals, even though there was very little manufacturing activity and little hope for any more industrial growth.

Today, Savanna builds huge lofts and rents the street-level spaces to galleries and restaurants. Not far to the south, on 17th Street, World Wide Holdings Corp. does something similar, and the Meatpacking District of the far west Village has practically disappeared as old warehouses are being-turned into apartments.

Among Chelsea gallery spaces are other SoHo exiles like John Weber, Barbara Gladstone, Metro Pictures, 303 Gallery, Bose Pacia Gallery, and Agora Gallery.

“Chelsea affords you access to critics and curators that make the rounds regularly to look at galleries,” said Dr. Steve Pacia, co-founder and co-partner with Dr Arani Bose of the Bose Pacia Gallery on West 26th Street.

Bose Pacia Gallery, established in 1994 in SoHo, was the first gallery in the West specializing in contemporary art from South Asia. During the last ten years, Bose Pacia has held over 30 exhibitions and is internationally regarded for promoting the South Asian avant-garde. Visual artists from South Asia work within a unique space that is informed by many cultures, languages and religions. Bose Pacia fosters an active discourse between these artists and the international art community by featuring exhibitions that contextualize contemporary art from this geographic region within its rich artistic traditions and current social tensions.

Established in 1984 in SoHo by a fine artist, Agora Gallery more than doubled its space when it moved to Chelsea in 2003. A gallery without borders, Agora was one of the pioneer galleries providing representation to both national and international artists.

Recent interviews by its director, Angela Di Bello, in Business News Weekend (NBC) Hellenic Public Radio, and the Wall Street Journal have brought additional attention and visitors to Chelsea.

The New Museum also left SoHo for an interim spot in Chelsea but has closed its doors, with the exception of its bookstore space at the Chelsea Art Museum, for a year and a half until the construction of its much anticipated new building on the Bowery is opened. Designed by the acclaimed Tokyo based company of Sejima and Nishizawa/SA-NAA, the new 60,000 square foot, seven-story New Museum will be the first art museum building constructed in downtown Manhattan in over a century.