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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

The artists of New York no longer bloom in a decayed downtown. Tenth Street and Greenwich Village, Soho, Tribeca, Union Square: the areas that once nurtured artists' studios now contain the most expensive real estate in the country. It's a development that owes as much to culture as to policy. Today's beneficiaries of the financial services industry, the city's enduring economic engine, harbor a fierce *nostalgie de la boue*. So wealth has migrated from the pre-war "classic sixes" of the Upper East Side to the lofts and brownstones downtown. And in their pursuit of the down and out, the rich have inadvertently chased the artists from their studios in the heart of town.

Perhaps we should be thankful for the shakeout. Art-world centers are often peripheries. Montmartre and Montparnasse, two modernist neighborhoods at the turn of the last century, were the bookends of Paris, north and south of the city center and connected in 1910 by the Nord-Sud metro line. Today's New York follows the same model. Artists are again pushed to the outskirts. Rather than being disconnected extremities, the peripheral communities they establish become vital frontiers, each developing its own characteristics.

In addition to offering studio and living space, many of these neighborhoods boast new galleries. Often artist-run, these galleries are becoming as important as the blue chips of Manhattan. They are also far more welcoming. You don't need a passport to get to them, even if the locations may sound exotic and

the subway stations unknown. Since many of these galleries maintain weekend-only hours, a Sunday afternoon outer-borough gallery crawl is fast emerging as a tradition on par with the Thursday-evening openings in Chelsea.

Founded in 2007, the gallery English Kills is already the old timer of Bushwick—currently the most rewarding artist center in Brooklyn—with an A-list lineup of talent. The director Chris Harding has described the gallery as his antidote to working for a year at Mary Boone. Still the space exudes its own sense of ambition. The largest gallery in the neighborhood, English Kills often shows expansive art—fast, messy paintings and installations with jock swagger. The frat-house quality of the place (which can seem like a cave) is sometimes reinforced by the odd hipster loafing on the disposable beach chair outside. You might also spot a parade of initiates, beer in hand, regularly emerging through a curtain separating the exhibition space from the private rooms in the back. Yet fear not—this gallery still gets the Good Gallerygoing Seal of Approval; I've even changed my baby's diaper in the back room.

Andy Piedilato, the artist now on view at English Kills, is one reason to pay attention to this gallery.¹ With canvases over nine-foot square, Piedilato has been refining his use of hatch marks to denote bathroom-tile surfaces undulating in space. With the grout lines first

¹ "Andy Piedilato: New Paintings" opened at English Kills Art Gallery, Brooklyn, on December 4, 2010 and remains on view through January 9, 2011.

laid down in masking tape, Piedilato has been able to focus the rough expressive energy of his paint handling to create a mash-up of neo-expressionism and Op Art. In some paintings, like *Hummingbird* and *Iceboat*, the spectral iconography of sinking ships and surfacing submarines plays off the weight of the bricked-up surfaces. In others, such as the more abstract *Nut Rolling Through Hills*, *Red Roll*, *The Antagonist*, and *Maze*, Piedilato tells his stories almost exclusively through volume and pattern. In all of them, the tactile surfaces feel like the tiles of a cold shower in a strange dream. These paintings are wet and chilly in a way you can't easily shake off.

Storefront may be a gallery just around the corner from English Kills, yet the style of the two spaces could not be more different. I have covered Storefront, which Jason Andrew and Deborah Brown opened a year ago, on a few occasions in this space. I wish I could have written about every one of their three-week shows. Andrew and Brown have an interest in jewel-like work that plays off the small scale of their gallery as well as a local taste for the intimate and ad hoc. Austin Thomas's solo show of bits of printed words and delicate paper collages of origami folds, which ran at Storefront in September and October, was the summa of this aesthetic.

The collage and assemblage artist Andrew Hurst is an English Kills regular, yet most recently his work went on display at Storefront.² Hurst is an expansive Bushwick artist who often creates performance pieces and writes his own poetry and music. The change in venue to tiny Storefront allowed us to observe his energy by focusing on his smaller work.

Is collage the creepiest of art forms? There might be a reason why criminals write their ransom notes from cut-up magazines. The repurposing of found objects and printed materials has an quasi-occult quality. Andrew Hurst follows in this tradition. Yet unlike his darker influences of Kurt Schwitters or Ray Johnson, Hurst practices only white magic. For him the power of collage and assemblage (which

brings collage out to the third dimension) offers a compelling way to unlock materials. Hurst then reuses his found objects to depict a personal mythology. He starts with one or two pieces—often the lowliest castoffs pulled from the streets of Bushwick (a flattened shoe; the gears of a watch). By slowly adding more material, drawn through poetic associations—with paint and the textures of other found pieces thrown in the mix—he gives these cast-aways new life. *Peel Sessions* starts with a shredded tire and becomes a black hole filled with plastic gears and other personal ephemera. The work reminds me of the sculptures of Lee Bontecou, here turned into a meditation on speed and the mechanics of movement. Hurst also creates icons to his heroes—a gold-speckled championship panel to Muhammad Ali in *The Greatest*, and a diptych memorializing Max Ernst and Hurst's pet tarantula in *Homage to Max and Becky*. Unlike many collage artists who revel in the superficial jokes of pop juxtapositions, Hurst goes for more profound impact, with detailed work that rewards close viewing.

Centotto is another nearby gallery that warrants a stopover. Paul D'Agostino is a young professor of Italian literature who has carved a project space out of the living room of his shared apartment. He mounts shows that feel like graduate seminars—with assigned readings and a conversation among classmates you only half understand. His immersive approach has its place. You pick up the ideas in the room even if you don't catch every word. "Marksmen and the Palimpsests" was a two-artist exhibition on view last month that well reflected the Centotto style.³ Here John Avelluto created his own three-hole notebook paper, with fabricated erasures and blue and red margin lines sometimes warping in odd directions. Josh Willis built up and scraped away scumbled paint to depict the Tower of Babel. Each played off the notions of unstable surfaces, where the end point looks like the start. The dialogue was brainy. Even if you didn't get it, you felt elevated for having overheard the discussion.

² "Andrew Hurst" was on view at Storefront, Brooklyn, from October 22 through November 14, 2010.

³ "Marksmen and the Palimpsests" was on view at Centotto, Brooklyn, from November 5 through December 17, 2010.

Moving on to the Bronx, I recently traveled to a bucolic corner of Riverdale for an experiment in mixing contemporary art and Judaism. The show was by Jill Nathanson, and the venue was a stunning little museum overlooking the Hudson River Palisades that happens to be tucked in a retirement home.⁴

A recent exhibition at the Jewish Museum, featuring religious commissions by Robert Motherwell, Herbert Ferber, and Adolph Gottlieb, served as a good reminder that abstract art can be ideally suited for faiths that shun literal representation. Trained in American abstraction, Nathanson found new inspiration creating Jewish work several years ago by mixing Hebrew lettering into her swirling compositions. I remember once encountering a painting by Marsden Hartley that also incorporated Hebrew, and thinking that it appeared ideally American—full of that Old-Time Religion. Nathanson's work likewise seems to be a natural extension of Abstract Expressionism, which of course never quite shook its mystical origins.

Following the lettering work, which she called "Seeing Sinai," Nathanson took on the subject of Genesis for a series depicting the origin of the world. But just how do you depict nothing out of something? For this she did a close Torah reading with rabbis. In the "welter and waste" of her studio, Nathanson saw parallels in the act of creation. She made seven collages, each representing a day of creation, of colorful plastic sheets mixed in with the detritus of her artistic process.

Unfortunately, Nathanson sometimes overbuilds her compositions, resulting in a muddy mix. I was not a fan of the drippy plastics in the latest work, with welter and waste that looked more toxic than divine. Yet art sometimes succeeds in failure. Nathanson's experiment in studio process and biblical scholarship is both an inspiration and a challenge for a new (old) direction in art.

Finally a word about the artist Loren Munk. Many gallery goers might know him

through his pseudonym, James Kalm, and his online "James Kalm Report." Since what must be the dawn of the internet age, Munk has been taking his interest in the contemporary art scene to the web by somewhat secretly filming and narrating gallery openings, large and small, with a digital camera strapped to his chest. A one-man Archives of American Art, Munk has created a singular cultural record by posting all of these videos free of charge on his website (lorenmunk.com) and on YouTube.

For anyone who obsesses over the history of art in New York, Munk is like that brilliant professor of anthropology who knows everything but sometimes forgets to take his meds. Under his given name, Munk paints heavily impastoed canvases of diagrams detailing the locations of artist studios and influences among the great schools and critics (Munk is a critic himself who writes for *The Brooklyn Rail*). Often these colorful charts riff on Alfred Barr's old MOMA visuals of the history of modern art. Two of these panels are now on view in an exhibition at Minus Space, a gallery on the border of Carroll Gardens and the Gowanus Canal that I wrote about two months ago for its project show on Robert Swain.⁵

Munk's work is meant to be absorbed as much for its swirling compositions and overall effect as for its didactic information. In their bright colors and levels of detail, the diagrams also seem to revere the artists and critics they depict. Next to them, Matthew Deleget of Minus Space has posted his collection of *Life* magazine's historical coverage of modern art, including 1949's "Jackson Pollock: Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?"

At the opening, there was a rush to see who would film the show à la James Kalm. Sharon Butler ended up making the video for her blog twocoatsofpaint.com. There could not have been a better tribute to Munk—a recognition that his work may just be art history in the making.

⁴ "Sacred Presence/Painterly Process" was on view at the Derfner Judaica Museum, The Bronx, from September 26 through December 31, 2010.

⁵ "Becoming Modern in America" opened at Minus Space, Brooklyn, on December 11, 2010 and remains on view through January 29, 2011.