



Julia Chaplin, “Art Scene Heats Up in Downtown Los Angeles,” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2016.

The New York Times

Art Scene Heats Up in Downtown Los Angeles

By Julia Chaplin | February 12, 2016



Davida Nemeroff, left, and Mieke Marple run the Night Gallery, which is arguably the epicenter of the underground art scene in Los Angeles. Credit: Emily Berl for *The New York Times*

LOS ANGELES — A glittery film premiere this was not.

On a warm Thursday night in November, a swarm of 20-something artists and their friends crammed into a makeshift screening room at 356 Mission, a de facto arts clubhouse near downtown Los Angeles, far from the glare of Hollywood.

An art film by Maggie Lee called “Mommy” was making its West Coast debut, and instead of designer fishtail gowns, the young and trendy wore unflattering mom jeans and wedge sandals, and carried tote bags.



After the hourlong film ended, guests spilled out into the gravel courtyard, which was fortified by metal gates and barbed wire, to drink cherry cocktails and Tecate beer. It could have been mistaken for a prison yard if not for the string of Christmas lights and some potted plants.

“It’s like a dream here with all the artists around,” said Ms. Lee, a 27-year-old filmmaker from New York, who was huddled with a crowd of well-wishers. “But it’s also desolate, and the only sound I hear all night are big trucks.”



An art film by Maggie Lee called “Mommy” made its West Coast debut in a makeshift screening room at 356 Mission, a de facto arts clubhouse near downtown Los Angeles. Credit: Emily Berl for *The New York Times*

Such is the forbidding allure of Los Angeles’s ever-expanding Arts District. In the last two years, more than 24 galleries have moved into the warehouses and decommissioned factories in downtown Los Angeles on either side of the desiccated Los Angeles River, including the Arts District and neighboring Boyle Heights, offering a new party destination for the city’s thriving art scene.

Influential galleries from New York and London, including Venus Over Los Angeles, Maccarone and Ibid, have set up outposts alongside local galleries with fancy pedigrees like the Box (run by the artist Paul McCarthy’s daughter, Mara McCarthy) and Wilding Cran (owned by Anthony Cran and Naomi deLuce Wilding, the granddaughter of Elizabeth Taylor).

On the scrappier end of the spectrum are do-it-yourself artist spaces tucked into sunbaked strip malls, with their free-flowing beer and taco-fueled late-night ragers. High-end coffee shops and trendy restaurants have also arrived, creating a social hub far removed, both geographically and philosophically, from the stranglehold of Tinseltown



“It’s very similar to what I was doing at my spaces in New York,” said Jeffrey Deitch, the former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, who is known for his scene-making Deitch Projects in SoHo in the late 1990s and 2000s. “The social aspect is essential for artistic innovation. Artists working in isolation rarely have the same achievement.”

It is worth noting that the art-hopping milieu in Los Angeles is a relatively new phenomenon. Not long ago, Hollywood film premieres and private parties dominated the social landscape, with proximity to celebrity culture the main measure of glamour and exclusivity.



Guests after the screening of “Mommy” in the courtyard outside 356 Mission. Credit: Emily Berl for *The New York Times*

On that scale, art openings barely registered (except, perhaps, for those held by a few top galleries like Gagosian in Beverly Hills).

“When I moved here six years ago from New York, art openings were not considered as culturally cool as they are now,” said Shamim Momin, the founder of the Los Angeles Nomadic Division, a nonprofit arts group, and a former curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. “Maybe you’d see John Baldessari there to support one of his students, but that was usually about as glam as it got.”

But as money and celebrities began pouring into the art scene, the social calendar recalibrated: Witness red carpet spectacles like the Art & Film gala at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Now in its fifth year, the most recent gala in November featured Leonardo DiCaprio and Eva Chow as hosts, Gucci as a sponsor, and a parade of stars (Kim Kardashian, Chloë Sevigny, Jared Leto) who became fodder for countless best-dressed slide shows.



The unveiling of the Broad museum last September, a futuristic white honeycombed feat of geometry designed by Diller Scofidio & Renfro in downtown Los Angeles, was similarly glamorous, with guests including Owen Wilson, Tobey Maguire and Gwyneth Paltrow.

“Culturally we’ve always been overshadowed by the film industry, and now the art world is at a weird parallel with it,” said Sterling Ruby, one of Los Angeles’s most bankable artists, who has a four-acre studio complex in Vernon, Calif., an industrial city just south of the Arts District.

While it’s unlikely that Ms. Kardashian will be partying in the Arts District anytime soon, the art openings there have become a social circuit, with blue-chip galleries and adventurous collectors mixing with notable artists, newer spaces and assorted hangers-on.



A hole in the fence dividing Night Gallery and François Ghebaly Gallery in downtown Los Angeles is itself an art piece. Credit: Emily Berl for *The New York Times*

“The area has exploded in the last five to 10 years,” said Paul Schimmel, the former chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, who teamed up with Hauser & Wirth to develop Hauser Wirth & Schimmel, a sprawling arts complex set to open next month in the Arts District.

“The energy has been activated here by a younger generation, mostly 25-to-30-year-olds who want to walk, ride bicycles and live and work in a neighborhood,” Mr. Schimmel said. “We are following this youth culture.”

The rough-and-tumble streetscape of the Arts District and nearby Boyle Heights seems to dictate the social timbre. Warehouses, abandoned factories, scrap-metal yards and a few strip clubs line the wide streets with a steady



shake of trucks roaring past. At night, the sidewalks are still largely devoid of life, except for an occasional cluster gathered outside an art gallery.

But signs of development — the moneyed, artisanal variety — are everywhere. A dozen new luxury condos with names like Molino Street Lofts have opened along South Santa Fe Avenue and South Alameda Street, with two-bedroom apartments in the converted brick warehouse selling for \$1.175 million. Buzz-making restaurants like Bestia, with its homey industrial décor and locavore Italian menu, draw well-dressed diners.

And an outpost of the members-only Soho House is opening on South Santa Fe Avenue, down the street from the CB1 Gallery, in a six-story warehouse with a rooftop pool, restaurant and hotel rooms. “You can stay for a period of time — a couple of weeks, a couple of months,” the Soho House founder, Nick Jones, told *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Two blocks away, a Stumptown coffee shop opened in a squat brick warehouse with exposed ceiling rafters, and cold brew and kombucha on tap. On a recent Saturday, groups of young people appeared in the late-afternoon sun, walking small dogs or riding skateboards.



The painter Sojourner Truth Parsons recently moved from Toronto to Boyle Heights, where she pays \$1,000 a month for her light-filled loft. Credit: Emily Berl for *The New York Times*

The epicenter of the underground art scene is arguably the Night Gallery. Run by Davida Nemeroff, 34, and Mieke Marple, 29, the gallery occupies an enormous white-brick warehouse on East 16th Street, with a giant parking lot that is often used for parties. The only way to tell the building apart from its industrial neighbors is by the acid-hued acrylics by the artist Yunhee Min that cover the windows.



Its booze-soaked openings are like populist galas that draw hundreds of the young and hip. Last September, it hosted a zany art performance called “Run(a)way,” in which a fashion designer named Barf Queen had models bathing in kiddie pools filled with Kool-Aid, and bartenders with exposed breasts served cocktails.

“It’s all about discovery and taking chances and hopefully finding something revelatory,” Ms. Marple said, as she gave a tour of her gallery.

Many of the artists who frequent Night Gallery’s parties live or work nearby, drawn to the area’s cheap rents and a sense of community. “There’s a sense of Peter Pan’s Lost Boys around here,” said the painter Sojourner Truth Parsons, 27, who moved her studio to Mirasol Street in Boyle Heights from Toronto eight months ago. She pays \$1,000 a month for a light-filled loft.

“You still have to worry about making money, but it feels like you can make it work on little,” Ms. Parsons said. “There isn’t that daily grind. It’s mainly tacos and stray dogs and really nice people.”