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Looking For a Few Good Tenants: LA's New Downtown Gallery Scene

by Nathalie Hegert



The onset of winter in Los Angeles feels more like spring anywhere else. After a few days of long-awaited rain, the hills were starting to show new green growth for the first time after a scorching dry summer. As the morning rains gave way, dramatic clouds staggered across a clear blue sky, and I made my way downtown, into Los Angeles’s steadily gentrifying industrial heart. The change in L.A.’s downtown landscape is striking—once empty streets now boast hopping nightlife spots and zero open parking

spots, and where heroin pushers once peddled their product in broad daylight, there is now a Starbucks. A sign atop an old brick building reads, “Original Artist Lofts, Looking For a Few Good Tenants.” Another says, “FILM HERE!”

Downtown warehouse spaces in LA have long housed artist studios, where maximum space comes for minimum rent. But in the past couple of years galleries have been following suit, moving eastward and taking up residence in old warehouses with gritty exposed brick, lofty wooden rafters and square footage ample enough to show big projects. One of the “pioneers” of the downtown trend is 356 South Mission Road, which, fittingly, began as an artist’s studio before becoming an exhibition space. In 2012, painter Laura Owens was looking for a site that could serve a dual, integrated purpose: a space in which to produce and exhibit art. It was a simple proposition: Owens sought to create an exhibition of paintings that would then be shown on the same site where they had been created. “Laura picked the building, not the neighborhood,” said Ethan Swan, the gallery manager of 356 Mission, when I visited on that crisp, rain-flushed afternoon. The building, with its vast interior space (it was formerly a lithographic print studio, then a piano warehouse), instigated the grand scale of Owens’s series *12 Paintings*, which were painted over the course of a year and then exhibited on site from January to July of 2013. But things didn’t end there.

As Owens recounts in interviews at the time, the process of putting on *12 Paintings* reminded her of previous collaborative enterprises and experiences in curating other artists’ work. Her

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interests in bringing artists together in new contexts, and simply “allowing other things to happen,” precipitated the continuation of 356 Mission as a multi-purpose events and exhibition space. Since its opening, 356 Mission has shown exhibitions of work by Sturtevant, Alex Katz and Scott Reeder, among others, and has hosted events ranging from basement karaoke parties to art-making workshops for children. Their most recent Kids Day workshop, for instance, was inspired by the sponge motif of French painter Claude Viallat, whose elegantly draped ink on fabric paintings form part of the current exhibition of works from the *Supports/Surfacemovement*. This kind of external thematic programming is reminiscent of the educational and outreach components of non-profit organizations, and I mentioned this to Swan as we paused to look at one of Viallat’s paintings, gently suspended from the rafters. He replied that the ethos of 356 Mission is to be “as open as possible,” allowing the gallery to put on a variety of programs and to simply indulge in whatever interests might be circulating at the moment. When I visited, the gallery was busy planning their next event/exhibition, which opens December 21: the Cats-in-Residence program, where adoptable kittens will cavort in an artist-designed enclosure surrounded by cat-themed art.

The openness of 356 Mission is also reflected in its attitude toward the surrounding community. At the inaugural exhibition of Laura Owens’s paintings at 356 Mission, the Chinatown-based art bookstore Ooga Booga set up shop in the front of the building, which now operates as its permanent second location, or Twooga Booga. The book store environment—with its posters, books, magazines, LPS and cassettes, clothing and accessories—offers a welcoming and non-intimidating entrance to the gallery. Free tea and coffee and a long communal table complete the accessible, social vibe of the space, which, according to Swan, is vital for encouraging encounters among the visitors to the gallery.

Navigating the terrain of the downtown LA industrial sector, the importance of the social amenities offered by the galleries that have sprung up in the area became apparent. 356 Mission is located across the East River from downtown, and its neighbors are composed almost exclusively of active warehouses and a few artist studios—with no restaurants, cafes or bars close by, the gallery has stepped in to provide those functions for its patrons. I found a similar situation at nearly every gallery I visited, with extensive outdoor patios and lounge areas attached to each one. At the opening of the new Harmony Murphy Gallery (which opened in September along with *Ibid*. Projects from London in two adjacent warehouses on Santa Fe Avenue), an installation by Kathryn Garcia took the concept of the outdoor social area to a spectacular zenith. Garcia constructed a pyramidal metal frame centered over a mirrored fire pit around which gallery-goers congregated—a vernissage that critic Andrew Berardini called “a metaphysical gathering place.”

Night Gallery, located down the road just off of Washington Boulevard, began more as a site of social encounter and interaction than a conventional gallery. Founded in 2010 by Montreal-native and New York transplant, artist Davida Nemeroff, Night Gallery adhered to bar hours rather than gallery time—open from 10pm to 2am. It billed itself as a “nocturnal platform” for viewing art, and became a favorite among the Los Angeles artist community. In 2011, artist Mieke Marple joined forces with Nemeroff, and now Night Gallery has recently grown into its own, having relocated in January 2013 from Lincoln Heights to its current downtown location, where it now keeps more standard hours. The art, however, remains experimental, and opening nights attract a young artist crowd. The last opening featured a bar within the gallery, serving cocktails that consisted of a shot of liquor served

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within a halved passion fruit. The rinds from that evening still litter the long bar, imbuing the space with a slightly sweet, slightly stale, somewhat musty odor.

Night Gallery occupies a unique warehouse space with an inexplicable lack of right angles and neighbors a building that houses François Ghebaly Gallery, Fahrenheit, Los Angeles Contemporary Archive, and 2nd Cannons. Rachel LaBine, Night Gallery's director, who has only lived in Los Angeles for about a year since moving from New York, told me that even in that short span of time she's seen rapid changes in the Los Angeles art scene with new galleries popping up all the time. The current exhibition by Pentti Monkkonen, Amy Yao, and Andrei Koschmieder, *Paris de Noche*, references "the nature of the neighborhood around Night Gallery, of art galleries as a spearhead of gentrification (Hausmanization?) of industrial and traditionally Mexican neighborhoods," as the press release states. The exhibition brings together an intriguing collection of artworks with urban and industrial overtones—ladders, box trucks, doorways, masks, corrugated fences, and pigeons.

As I drove away from the downtown galleries that day, treated to a spectacular LA sunset, I spotted "For Rent" and "For Sale" signs up on several vacant industrial and commercial buildings. One can imagine that these buildings may soon be taken over by new galleries, as the scene continues to evolve, seeking out the caverns of ex-industry to occupy with new experiments in art making and social gatherings.