



LOS ANGELES DOWNTOWN NEWS

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SECTION

A BRAVE NEW ART WORLD

With 60 Galleries, Most Arriving in the Last Five Years, the Downtown Art Scene Enjoys the Growth, and Endures the Growing Pains

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Gallery owners: Bert Green, James Rojas, Marquis Lewis and Edward Duarte.

BY KRISTIN FRIEDRICH
CALENDAR EDITOR

Every month James Elaine, the curator of the Hammer Projects at the prestigious Westwood Hammer Museum, drives to Chinatown. Once there, he visits about a dozen galleries on Chung King Road and nearby streets, knowing that the area has hosted some of the city's most exciting art finds of the last five years. Heading Downtown to scout new artists in a compact gallery cluster might have seemed unfashionable in the '90s, but today it's part of the job for Elaine and others in the Los Angeles art world.

"Along with Culver City and Bergamot, it's one that you

have to go to," Elaine says, mentioning two of the city's Westside art hubs. "The roots are growing down there, the vision's growing up."

Indeed, the entire Downtown art scene is growing. Where once there were just a handful of spaces and artists'

SHOWROOM

studios scattered across the community, Downtown now boasts more than 60 galleries (see list page 24). They have formed largely around two clusters — one in Chinatown, which took off in 2000, and another in the Historic Core, which is gaining momentum now. While Chinatown is still

home to young, whimsical spaces, it also holds a handful of serious commercial galleries that draw international collectors. The gallery owners routinely head to big name art fairs, where their work sells quickly.

Yet as the Downtown art scene matures, it is also experiencing growing pains. Dozens of galleries have opened in the last few years, but many that seemed like potential stars have left — some closed, and others moved out of the area. At the same time, the art on display has been decidedly mixed; slick, commercial spaces can be just steps away from rental galleries, where anything can hang for a price.

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Galleries

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Then there's the area's economy: The residential explosion that helped lure the galleries to the Historic Core may cause some of them to be kicked out, as building owners find they can make more money with retail or residential spaces than they can with art showrooms.

Still, what is undeniable is that for the first time in decades, the Downtown art scene is on the map.

"It's still a long way from the booming Downtown gallery scene of the 1980s," says *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight, "but L.A. has really diversified its gallery neighborhoods since then, when they tended to be concentrated in just a couple of areas. Now there's Venice, Santa Monica, Mid-Wilshire, Culver City, West Hollywood,

Chinatown and, it appears, the Historic Core."

Escalation in the Core

Like the neighborhood itself, the Historic Core art scene is a story of momentum. In late 1999 developer Tom Gilmore announced plans for hundreds of residential units around Fourth and Main streets in an area he named the Old Bank District. Dozens of developers have followed suit, as have the theories that urban pioneers can be arts patrons, and galleries can bring cachet to blighted streets.

In May 2004, thanks to a proposal by Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council (DLANC) members Kjell Hagen and Nik Cha Kim, and passed by the City Council, the area bordered by Spring, Main, Second and Ninth streets was officially christened Gallery Row. It opened with four art spaces and plans for more. DLANC began an outreach program to educate gallerists about property owners, and vice versa.

Less than a year later, the area has expanded to 13 galleries.

A five-volunteer group called the Gallery Row Organization (GRO) has branched off from DLANC and set up shop in the Spring Arts Tower building, where it offers information about tax breaks and incentives for those interested in the art business. Gallerist and GRO member Bert Green and DLANC President Brady Westwater say they take almost daily phone calls from prospective gallery owners. Westwater frequently gives personal tours of the neighborhood.

Perhaps the most important element of the evolution has been the monthly art walk that GRO launched last September. Institutions such as the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Neon Art have signed on, and a total of 23 galleries, museums and non-profit spaces participate. The original boundaries have been expanded to include South Park and the area east of Alameda Street. It has proved to be a hit with both art lovers and the merely art curious — the January and February walks each attracted hundreds of

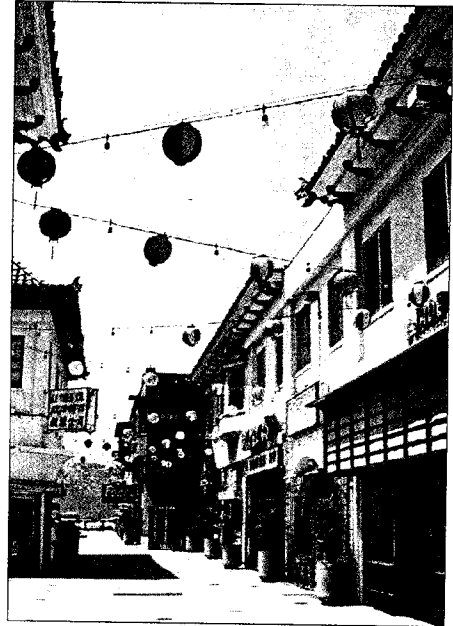


photo by Gary Leonard

Chung King Road used to be best known for its gallery parties. There are still parties, but some of the galleries now are destination spots for collectors from all over the world.



Kjell Hagen (left) and Nik Cha Kim wrote the proposal that launched Gallery Row.

photo by Gary Leonard

people.

Adrian Rivas, co-owner of Gallery 727, says the foot traffic is increasing with each art walk. "For me, it all helps. I pick up new clients without trying," he says. "I can't keep up with everybody's name though. I'm already doing that gallery thing: I walk around saying, 'It's wonderful to see you.'"

Tom Pratt, a longtime fine art insurer who opened Spring Street's Gallery 626 last November, says his guest book reveals Westsiders have no problem driving Downtown for the art



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Kathryn Hargreaves and Tim Quinn have to move their popular Arts District space, Dangerous Curve, because the building it's in is going condo.

walks. Pratt himself came to the arts because he has several clients nearby, and he wanted to be part of Gallery Row and take advantage of the tax incentives. "I looked at Culver City and Bergamot," Pratt says. "This was the place to be. It's like another SoHo or Chelsea."

It's a consistent theme. Although Lorraine Molina and José Caballer weren't sure about Downtown, Gilmore made them a deal on rent and they opened Bank in 2003. "Tom wanted to create a neighborhood. He specifically wanted a gallery," Molina says.

For his part, Green, formerly the owner of Circle Elephant Art in Los Feliz, started attending DLANC meetings in 2003. He was intrigued, began searching for a space, and ultimately signed a three-year lease for a former hat shop on the ground floor of the Rosslyn Hotel at Fifth and Main streets. He opened Bert Green Fine Art last year.

Others have followed him to the corner: Longtime Downtown painter and screen printer Francesco Siqueiros opened El Nopal across the street from Green. Also new are the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art and artist group Pharmaka's non-profit exhibit space.

Not everyone has been receptive to the art walks. Jean Milant, longtime owner of the Alameda Street Cirrus Gallery, turned Green down. "I said I wouldn't be part of it unless it included Chinatown. I don't like that 'we're special' attitude," Milant says.

Anatomy of a Cluster

All hype and pride aside, Los Angeles' art scene has long been dwarfed by the one in New York, and there are numerous reasons why some believe L.A. is not, and never will be, a gallery town: Arts here are not as closely tied to the party circuit as they are in New York; there are fewer non-profit art institutions to serve as the middle ground between museums and galleries; and geographically, the city is too spread out for easy gallery hopping.

"Art is 10th on the list of what people are interested in here," says artist Shepard Fairey, best known for his posters of wrestler Andre the Giant with commands like "Obey" in bold letters. "We do sporadic showings at my print studio at Sixth and Alameda, DJs and bands, and turn it into a party. We have to piggyback the art with something higher on the coolness list."

In Los Angeles, the logic goes, few people are inclined to get in their car for a single show. But if they can make an event out of the expedition, see several spaces and be part of a "scene," gallery hopping becomes an option.

Clusters have come and gone in the city. The '60s featured Monday night art walks on La Cienega Boulevard. The '70s brought attention to other parts of West Hollywood and Venice. In the early '80s, a buzz-worthy gallery scene emerged Downtown, spurred in part by the 1979 founding of V/OCA. Milant, who moved Cirrus from Melrose Boulevard to Alameda Street that same year, started a sporadic weekend festival called LAVA (Los Angeles Visual Arts) that drew visitors to studios on Broadway, and art spaces like the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art and the fabled LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), known for its socially conscious, democratic program and its gigantic, police-busted parties. Galleries opened on both sides of Alameda, at Traction Avenue, Boyd and Industrial streets.

But by the late '80s, the economy was slowing and the Downtown gallery presence began to shrink. "Some couldn't stay open and lost their leases, some went west," Milant says. "I was alone again."

A decade later, a gallery cluster in Chinatown would change the face of Downtown art-going once more.

Hype and Post-Hype

In the late '90s, two spaces opened on the pedestrian walkway called Chung King Road. More followed, and when the galleries started hosting communal openings on Saturday nights in 2000, the scene grew huge. Crowds teemed on the title road. Revelers dished about celebrity sightings, and

magazines like *Rolling Stone* reported on the buzz.

While the hype inevitably faded, and several galleries closed, many of those that survived have seen their reputations grow. Now spaces such as Black Dragon Society, China Art Objects, Happy Lion, Acuna-Hansen, Peres Projects, Sister, and the Jack Hanley, Daniel Hug, Mary Goldman and David Kordansky galleries are seen as reputable destinations. Lynn Zelevansky, a curator and head of the Contemporary Art department at LACMA, says she frequently sees collectors in Chinatown. "It's a little bit more professional than it used to be," she says. "There are a few galleries you can depend on."

The successful Chinatown gallerists say that survival requires more than hype. David Kordansky, who opened his space on Bernard Street in 2003, notes that foot traffic — even in a well-respected gallery area — isn't enough to sustain a business. Kordansky says much of his work is done on the phone, along with persuading local collectors to drive Downtown, he convinces buyers in New York, Chicago and

Europe to look at the art online and then get on a plane.

Mickey Kaplan, who this month will open a new Gallery Row space, called Modern Art Downtown, says this style of business is reminiscent of the gallery landscape Los Angeles often stands in the shadow of — New York. "You take major galleries in New York, you go in their back room, there are 10 guys on the phone making calls, just like a brokerage house, getting people into the galleries," observes Kaplan. "They're not going to wait for somebody to walk in the door and maybe buy a picture."

Those who know how to play the game are reaping the rewards. Peres, who opened his Chung King space in 2003 during the area's second wave of growth, says he and three other Chinatown gallerists will appear at this year's Armory Show in New York, meeting and selling to buyers from all over the world. He also says business is booming. "I'm opening a second space in Berlin, a second space in Chinatown. Things are pretty phenomenal," he says.

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Tale of Two Scenes

The Chinatown galleries have largely eschewed marketing their cluster as a whole, and though there are still concurrent openings in which several galleries participate, they are sporadic. Gallery Row takes the opposite approach. Gallerist Green's announcements about the art walks hit writers and collectors' e-mail in-boxes like clockwork. The GRO meets weekly, and art walk participants gather after the monthly events for "post mortems" to compare notes and bat around ideas.

"I have to admit at first I was skeptical, because the concept felt too forced," Bank's Molina says. "I think that a gallery scene happens organically. One person pops up, another person wants to be there too."

There is a steady stream of newcomers, but survival Downtown, as in most places, remains difficult. Galleries on both Chung King and Gallery Row have come and gone. Promising spaces including Gallery 835, Deep River, Inshallah and the Annex have closed. The Project recently moved to Culver City.

"It's very difficult to make money, so the failure rate for galleries is high," Green says. "Usually they don't last two or three years. Those who last beyond that usually last for a long time."

One problem, Kaplan notes, is experience, or the lack thereof. "It never lasts because the people owning the galleries, for the most part, they're not professionals, they're not willing to run the gallery like a business," he says.

Another concern is increasing rent. As more Downtown buildings go residential, and more people move into the area, once affordable spaces become suddenly more costly. Artists throughout Downtown have been driven out of their lofts as rents spike. Some speculate that the same thing could eventually happen to the gallerists. Westwater fears that in five years, many galleries won't be able to pay for ground floor spaces in the

Historic Core. He thinks they'll have to move up, and off the street.

"That's what New York is, the majority of the galleries are on upper floors there," he says. "It gives long-term stability, because the rental price will be such that these places won't be knocked out by a Starbucks."

A bit cast, the residential influx has impacted gallerists Kathryn Hargreaves and Tim Quinn. They recently found out their popular spot, Dangerous Curve, will have to relocate because the loft building it's located in is going condo. "We're working to stay Downtown," Quinn says, "but that's not as important to us as finding something we can afford."

Despite the challenges, more gallerists are coming Downtown, figuring that an area with 60 art spaces qualifies as a hot zone. One of the new arrivals is Shelly De Soto. Formerly the director of Beverly Boulevard's Stephen Cohen Gallery, De Soto will open a self-named space on the first floor of the Higgins Building this May; it will be a unique, three-level gallery with a basement mezzanine and a curved wall. She'll enjoy tax breaks because the building is in an empowerment zone. De Soto says she is not worried about the limited foot traffic on Second Street.

"That was a concern initially, particularly at night," De Soto says. "But we're going to see that change. All the new cool bars and restaurants, they're all down there."

Meanwhile, veterans of the Downtown art scene are approaching the current changes with a cautious optimism. They are happy about the increased attention, but aware of the business' ups and downs. Artist Gronk — who has lived on Spring Street for 16 years and has a show opening at Gallery 727 this Saturday — jokes that he can always spot the newcomers. "They usually wear flip-flops and are walking a dog," he laughs.

Gronk's overall philosophy is the more, the merrier, but commitment is key. "There's a big diversity of activity, with no one school of thought," Gronk says. "But they have to stay here for several years. Art isn't seasonal, it's long term."

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photo by Gary Leonard

Artist Shepard Fairey owns a print studio in the Arts District. He says he piggybacks art openings with DJs and live music to draw people.