

## *Brooklyn Dispatches* Bushwick Biennial: Venice It Ain't

by James Kalm

The bitter satisfaction of morning *caffè* lingers on the back of the tongue. The sun, burning through the mist, glimmers off the Grand Canal. A flock of cream-colored pigeons wheels overhead, the woofing of wings echoing the shuffle of exquisite leather soles on ancient cobblestones. Through squinted eyes, St. Mark's Square melds into a Turneresque haze of sundrenched yellows and aseptic ochers. Screeeech, caaachung, bang. Hey, wake up – this be Brooklyn. We got a canal – the Gowanus – a Grand Street, and sky-rat-pigeons that'll sucker-punch their Venetian cousins and use their bones for stickball. Yeah. Brooklyn. Jim Herbert in his Bushwick studio.

Since the emergence of the East Village in the early 80s, artsy types have been building scenes and garnering attention with a mix of DIY gumption and wide-eyed naïveté. For thirty years, this clan at the margins has been drifting ever farther east, first across the river to DUMBO and Bedford Avenue, then the BQE and with this latest iteration, to the vague reaches of Bushwick/Williamsburg Industrial Park, or more picturesquely, MOJO (between the Morgan and Jefferson Street stops on the L train).

Peddling east on Flushing, I chuckled to myself. The commercial art world is wallowing in the first wave of what one accountant has termed "an invisible blood bath:" galleries are closing, dealers are skipping town in the middle of the night, leaving their artists holding the bag. The glitterati have all jetted to Europe for the champagne circuit of Biennales and art fairs. What better time for this tough, grungy nabe to have its debutante ball?

The Bushwick Biennial, along with Bushwick Open Studios, is an example of the huge clusterfuck art happening that makes for exhausting, touring, great partying, occasionally interesting discoveries and headachy mornings. With over 115 studios and nearly a dozen galleries listed, this three-day fest is simply too big for one correspondent to cover, and though I tried, I could hit only a few of the highlights,

Pocket Utopia popped up on the radar about two years ago as a social sculpture/artist-in-the-community space, the brainchild of Austin Thomas, and it's going out on a high note (the space will close after this installment). Digital print collages by Kevin Regan give a Surrealist jolt: large portraits of Ronald Reagan with their eyes replaced by increasingly smaller versions of the same head shot, rendering this iconic face into a discordant unrecognizability. Jonathan VanDyke constructs a well-crafted box, open on one side, exposing a mirrored interior. Two tubes drip watery paint from eye level. On return viewings, wet pigment had begun to leak out and run along a seam in the gallery's floor. In the back garden, a three-meter-tall florescent foam sculpture – a psychedelic fertility deity with twin beer kegs for breasts – had thirsty artists

worshiping this "Goddess." Serving the crowd was jocular artist Ben Godward. Also included at Pocket Utopia were works by Valerie Hegarty, Rico Gatson, Molly Larkey and Austin Thomas.

One block west, English Kills trotted out their version of the Biennial. Curated by Phoenix Lights, this installment included eighteen artists and featured major works by Jim Herbert (a huge, chunky, copulating couple painted on a plaid ground titled "Plaid") and Andrew Ohanian (a folded sculptural fragment of contrasting interior walls, "Carpet, Drapes and Bag," which juxtaposes the wine-and-wood-toned schmaltz of ersatz haute culture with a shotgun-toting manikin that had apparently crashed through the blue stuccoed wall of a local social club). In the second gallery, the Gods of Mars, a loose confederacy of artists, presents a group of works including "Black Tower" by Andy Piedilato, a large, swirling, Piranesi-esque mass of briskly painted brick chimneys, buttresses and arches, and Lenny Reibstein's paintings of things happening below the waist: "Afterbirth," is a rendering in tasteful salmons, dirty pinks and peach of bloody female genitalia, placenta, a gray baby and a dripping penis, all portrayed like a manic cartoon version of Courbet's "The Origin of the World."

I was tipped off to the English Kills' Annex, about five blocks north on Ingraham Street, where I found a continuation of the show hung in the front section of this industrial building. But the attention-grabbers were the workspaces of Jim Herbert, Andy Piedilato and Carter Davis, welcoming visitors in conjunction with Bushwick Open Studios. Both Herbert and Piedilato like to work big, and eight-to twelve-foot-tall paintings were easily accommodated there. Though some of Herbert's work might be tied a bit too tightly to 1980s Neo-Expressionism (will we ever be able to look at gestural figuration without that taint?), I was impressed by his prolific energy; dozens and dozens of his massive paintings were neatly stacked against the walls. Carter Davis, who works on a more modest scale, employs a sensitive palette and a light touch, creating paintings with quirky narratives and clumsy but endearing pastiches of modernist tropes.

By the time I made it to the NURTUREart extravaganza, curated by director Ben Evans, I'd trekked many miles, perused many studios and imbibed more than a reasonable amount of the good and the bad in both art and beer. "Trailer Park" by Kim Holleman, a small 1960s trailer with a garden and fishpond inside, squatted in front of the gallery entrance. A cordon of red velvet ropes at the front door exuded a faux sense of exclusivity, no doubt a jab at the knuckleheaded elites and social-climbing scenesters who'd be attending this kind of affair if it were in Venice, Basil, or Miami. Stepping inside I was blinded by the light of an animated projection by Chris Hagerty installed in the stairwell, showing a series of rotating escalators. Upstairs, the festivities filled the gallery and spilled onto the roof next door, where I milled about, schmoozing while contemplating an installation by Audrey Hasen Russell, coiled pink foam sheeting that covered hundreds of square feet and resembled toxic dune grass. Back inside I was attracted to "Fallen," an exact reproduction of a BMX bike, fabricated from fiberboard and dowels by Jonathan Brand, that was lying casually on the gallery floor. The beige monochrome of this sculpture echoed the whiteness of the "Ghost Bikes," a project organized by the collective Visual Resistance, which memorializes the sites of local traffic fatalities with white bikes. A wall-occupying installation that included a Plexiglas case and rusty car parts, gnarly branches, weathered photos, maps and lenses by someone or something called Scrapworm was worth a glance. Though raising questions of content, this poetic weaving of timeworn objects hinted at some dark, obscure obsession.

Having missed the opening night performance at Grace Exhibition Space, I returned later and was greeted by a tour of "Human Touch, Divine Touch" by Sandra Jogeva, a stately, redheaded, Estonian dominatrix who'd created a tableau replica of a sleazy S&M den. This cubicle of corporal punishment, decorated in whorehouse red, included a cheesy couch, cubbyhole shelves stuffed with nasty accessories, Estonian money, an ashtray-strewn coffee table, and flickering TVs playing the artist's video documentations. Bolted to the wall were chains with leather harnesses. The floor was littered with empty Vaseline jars, scattered beside remnants of a plaster

body cast, used by the supplicant to protect himself from the wounds of the lash. As Sandra described this piece, "Do It Yourself S&M" was a chance for audience members to explore their own aptitudes for inflicting pain. The victim was chained and gagged, kneeling on the floor, and participants were encouraged to practice whipping him while Sandra gave technical pointers (it's all in the wrist). Sandra's explanations were as painful as they were comical, and I left exhausted yet purged of guilt.

Before I wrap up, let me briefly mention some of the other points of interest I came across. Drawn: Vasari Revisited or a Sparring of Contemporary Thought, at Norte Maar, representing the eastern end of the district (for the moment), is a tight drawing show full of gems. Several pieces—a trifecta of Jack Tworokov's thumbnail sketches, an Hermine Ford geometric gouache and a pair of preparatory drawings by Robert Moskowitz—hooked me. Nice to note the curator kept it all in the family (Hermine is Jack's daughter, and Robert's wife).

A couple of group shows at 56 Bogart: first, Fortress to Solitude with Chris Martin (who's also featured in New American Abstraction at Saatchi Gallery London this season), Gary Petersen offering a whimsical geometric abstraction, Tom Sanford doing his thing with a takeoff of the Barack Obama "Hope" poster, Guillermo Creus, Peter Fox, Elizabeth Cooper, Giles Lyon and others; second, "Vicious/Delicious," a Brooklyn College MFA thesis show teeming with buoyant, if somewhat derivative examples of Pop-flavored kitsch and Florescent Pathetic. It featured works by Emily Bicht, Susanne Cranston Graf, Zane Wilson, et al.

Finally, stumbling into the studio of Art Guerra was not only a joy because of his unmistakably luscious paintings but, for anyone with an alchemist's interest in pigment and the chemical properties of paint, it's an enlightening and educational encounter. Guerra loves to hold forth on the latest products for the painter's practice, and he's funny too. Using materials that seem borrowed from science fiction, his paintings seem to glow from within, smoldering with reflective hues only glanced in dreams, until now.

For a James Kalm video tour of the "Bush Biennial" visit:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x60JRbzfUnA&feature=channel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x60JRbzfUnA&feature=channel_page).