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From Pickles to Paintings in New York’s Lower East Side

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Denny Lee for The New York Times

Rental is an art gallery in a former mah-jongg parlor on East Broadway.

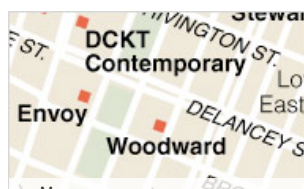
By MARY BILLARD Published: June 22, 2008

THE Lower East Side of Manhattan is being SoHo-fied. (Or is it Chelsea-fied?) Concrete floors are being poured next to Chinatown fish stalls. White walls are going up beside kitchen supply shops. And on-the-edge contemporary art is being sold in a neighborhood better known for peddling pickles and counterfeit Goyard bags.

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In the past year, a torrent of galleries has landed in this historically immigrant area, carving out a pioneering district for emerging artists. Anchoring the new gallery scene is the New Museum (235 Bowery; 212-219-1222; www.newmuseum.org), which moved into a striking seven-floor home on the Bowery last December. Since then, nearby galleries seem to be opening every month.

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Among the newest is the DCKT Contemporary (195 Bowery; 212-741-9955; www.dcktcontemporary.com), which relocated in March to a former lighting store down the street from the New Museum. Like many recent arrivals, the gallery had been in a smaller, more expensive space in Chelsea. “Chelsea had reached its saturation point,” said Dennis Christie, a director.

Part of the allure is the scrappy neighborhood itself. Unlike Chelsea, which can feel like a gallery ghetto, a Lower East Side gallery-hop weaves past landmark synagogues, hole-in-the-wall dumpling houses and grittier, un-hip slices of old New York.

Finding the new galleries is not always easy. One, Rental (120 East Broadway; 212-608-6002; www.rental-gallery.com), is tucked upstairs in a former mah-jongg parlor. So far, about 50 galleries have taken root, in an area bounded roughly between Houston and Canal Streets east of Bowery.

A good place to start is Envoy (131 Chrystie Street; 212-226-4555; www.envoygallery.com). Known for its cool roster of young artists, this former Chelsea gallery publishes a free gallery map called “L.E.S. is More.” There is also a Google Map created by Jen Bekman Gallery, at www.boweryartsdistrict.com.

In a departure from the traditional art world, most of the galleries in this district are open on Sunday. In fact, there’s even a gallery called Sunday L.E.S. (237 Eldridge Street; 212-253-0700; www.sundaynyc.com).

But the most welcome change may be in attitude. These galleries seem to reject the snobby intimidation associated with Chelsea. Instead of gallerinas lordng over you from behind a big desk, you’ll find owners eager to chat about their artists. On a recent visit to Luxe (53 Stanton Street; 212-582-4425; www.luxegallery.net), the owner, Stephan Stoyanov, referred to the artists as his “babies.”

Not all the galleries strive for bohemian punk. The Woodward Gallery (133 Eldridge Street; 212-966-3411; www.woodwardgallery.net) has a regal red door guarded by two Shar-Peis that go nicely with the Buddhist storefront temple next door. It deals in names like [Andy Warhol](#), Jean-Michel Basquiat and [Keith Haring](#) — making one wonder just how “budding” the Lower East Side gallery scene really is.

“Everyone talks about being a pioneer,” said Amy Smith-Stewart, formerly curator at P.S. 1, now owner of the Smith-Stewart gallery (53 Stanton Street; 212-477-2821; www.smith-stewart.com). “It’s New York. Someone was always there first.”

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