

# Chelsea Draws Some Arty Pioneers, but It's Not SoHo Yet

By Robin Pogrebin

There were blackened walls, floors thick with grease and harsh fluorescent bulbs along the cement ceiling, but what art dealer Marilu Lannon saw was a pristine white box with elegant track lighting. Once a sprawling, nondescript parking garage for yellow cabs, 530 West 22nd Street has now been transformed into a luminous, distinctive gallery, where Ms. Lannon shows contemporary paintings.

Other art dealers also have been showing interest in this industrial area of Chelsea, on the western edge of Manhattan; a few have actually taken action. Dealers Paul Morris and Pat Hearn, for instance, have signed a lease with landlord Guy Roberts to split the space one floor below the Lannon Gallery—space still cluttered with discarded taxi parts, like dented bumpers, battered doors and worn tires. And Matthew Marks, who owns a prestigious gallery on 78th Street and Madison Avenue, recently opened a 5,000-square-foot exhibition space a few doors down from the Lannon Gallery.

"My primary interest in moving to that location is that these particular blocks between 10th and 11th avenues are undeveloped," said Ms. Hearn, who has owned her gallery at 39 Wooster Street for six years. "One has to be inventive."

As Mr. Morris, who runs a gallery on Downing Street, explained, "In some ways, SoHo has really taken itself as far as it possibly can. It's become more of a retail space than an art space. Chelsea might be one of the last warehouse districts that's still in a position to be developed."

Several prominent SoHo dealers have explored potential gallery sites in Chelsea, mostly on West 22nd Street between 10th and 11th avenues: Paula Cooper (who opened the first gallery in SoHo in 1968), Roland Augustine, Barbara Gladstone, Curt Marcus, Sandra Gering and Andrea Rosen.

"There's a freshness over here, a chance to do something entirely new," said Guy Roberts, who with his wife, Ann, owns Ms. Lannon's gallery building and is backing her financially. "People in the art world are tired of being so commercialized. What was at one time a focused art community down there is being turned into a shopping mall, and people want to get away from that."

But those familiar with the new interest in Chelsea are quick to point out that

most of these dealers are so far merely circling the area. Only Ms. Lannon and Mr. Marks have actually signed on the dotted line. "There is a lot of tire kicking going on, that's for sure," said Alan Weisman, of Grubb & Ellis New York Inc., who specializes in industrial real estate on Manhattan's West Side. "Pulling the trigger, I haven't seen."

By any estimation—and certainly in comparison to SoHo—such a move represents a considerable risk to art dealers. This is not the Chelsea of even a few blocks east, where the Cineplex Odeon, the Joyce Theater and new restaurants along Eighth Avenue have attracted increasing foot traffic. The Chelsea in question is about as far west as one can get. Subways don't stop there, cabs don't cruise there. This is the Chelsea of Manhattan Mini Storage, B&E discount beer and U-Haul rental vans. This is the Chelsea of auto body shops, faded factory signs and nameless nightclubs along the West Side Highway. With the exception of the Empire Diner and Don Giovanni's brick oven pizza, most restaurants in this neighborhood have "for rent" signs in the windows. Even the air is different there, chilled by the breezes off the Hudson River.

That's just why Ms. Lannon likes the landscape. "I took one look at the place," she said. "I don't even know why I ever thought SoHo."

But Ms. Lannon made her move to Chelsea from Chicago, not SoHo, and that may be why she's less conflicted about it than SoHo dealers, who would be leaving their chic sanctuary of West Broadway and its environs for untested territory. As for Mr. Marks, his exhibition space on West 22nd Street supplements his Madison Avenue gallery without replacing it, which makes his foray into Chelsea seem somewhat safer.

"Very few people really want to be a pioneer in an outpost," said Jay Gorney, who has owned his modern art gallery on Greene Street for the last seven years. "I think people will feel more secure when they see other dealers of importance moving into the area.... My own position is one of watching and waiting."

"Everybody's been over there, but nobody has signed a lease on it," Mr. Morris said. "They're saying 22nd Street is the hottest property in New York, but nobody's bought a building."

Matthew Marks has bought a building,

and he says he doesn't understand why other dealers would hesitate to do the same; collectors will follow the art wherever it may be, he believes. "It never occurred to me that it was such a big deal," he said. "Basically, if you do good shows, any serious person will go anywhere."

Mr. Marks said he considered a space in SoHo, but "but what became clear as I started to look was that it was less and less about art galleries and more and more about shopping." And while his decision to come to Chelsea was not contingent on having company there, he suspects others in the business will not be far behind. "Somebody's going to want to open a gallery or expand

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just like me," he said. "They're going to come up with the same solution."

While they're in the vanguard, those dealers who are venturing into Chelsea feel they have some security in the presence of the Dia Center for the Arts, a nonprofit contemporary art institution that has been on West 22nd Street for the last seven years. Dia also owns two additional art spaces on the block, the Arnulf Rainer Museum and a fourth building, which is under construction as an exhibition space.

Dealers are further encouraged by the rebuilding of the Chelsea Piers between 17th and 23rd streets as a sports complex and film and television studio—part of the \$500 million renovation plan for the West Side waterfront. "I have no doubt but that, in three to five years, it's going to be booming," said Rosita Sarnoff, general manager of the Chelsea real estate brokerage Wells & Gay-Stribling. "I think it's the most exciting part of Manhattan right now, in terms of growth."

But it seems to be less the promise of Chelsea that is drawing art dealers than the decline of SoHo that is driving them out. Faced with rising rents and an influx of tourists, many dealers say they have become disillusioned with their downtown art community.

"The situation in SoHo has become rather commercial, and the leases that are coming due are almost prohibitively expensive," said Roland Augustine, co-owner of the Luhring Augustine Gallery at 130 Prince Street. "So the obvious alternative is to seek out situations that are realistic."

While asking prices in Chelsea—about \$10 to \$15 per square foot—are lower than those in SoHo—about \$15 to \$22 for upper floors and \$35 to \$100 for ground floors—the buildings in Chelsea need considerably more work before they can be used as art galleries. They are raw garage spaces; dealers have to start from scratch. "You've got to put in your own plumbing," Mr. Morris said. "Bills start to add up and you might as well be back in SoHo."

As a result, dealers who are considering a move say that landlords in Chelsea need to make their rents even more competitive if they hope to lure a critical mass to their properties. "Landlords seem to think they're already in SoHo," said Stefano Basilico, who is currently selling art on Broome Street. "The only reason to be there would be to get very large spaces at cheap rents. And you can't."

Members of Chelsea's community board and other residents say they would welcome a new arts enclave. But some are skeptical about its prospects for success. "It's going to take a while to catch on," said Gary Moore, a mechanic who services Time Warner Cable vehicles in a garage on West 22nd Street. "This neighborhood has been going down over the years."

Yet, with an unusual if-you-build-it-they-will-come confidence, Ms. Lannon is running full steam ahead, featuring the work of up-and-coming artists in her 5,000-square-foot gallery, which celebrated its opening Sept. 16. Having signed a 15-year lease, she's in for the long haul. And she doesn't seem to worry that on a recent Saturday morning, West 22nd Street was deserted, her gallery's bright blue and white banner the only one—at least, so far—whipping in the wind.