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Culture

Is Harlem New York City's Next Art Enclave?

Art dealer Elizabeth Dee has moved from New York's Chelsea to Harlem, where she just opened a 12,000-square-foot gallery. Will others follow?

by Julie Belcove

For the hard-charging art dealer Elizabeth Dee, even a leisurely bike ride is a business opportunity. After buying an apartment in Harlem four years ago, she pedaled around “asset mapping” the neighborhood. With the lease on her Chelsea gallery set to expire in early 2016, Dee was hunting for a new space when she cycled past an abandoned building with two sun-filled floors on Fifth Avenue at 126th Street, right next to the National Black Theatre. Through a chat with a local merchant, she found her way to the owner and signed a new lease.

On a hot summer morning months later, Dee, 42, is trying her best to be heard over the banging of construction workers who are readying the new gallery for its late-September debut. “By the time I left Chelsea it had become 57th Street,” she says, referring to the Manhattan retail haven. In Harlem, “you still have mom-and-pop stores. There’s the familiarity of a village. The economic and social diversity is radical in relationship to Chelsea.”

Contemporary art gallery Gavin Brown’s Enterprise moved from the West Village to 127th Street earlier this year, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, which, coincidentally, had its first home in Dee’s new space, is planning a major expansion with noted architect David Adjaye. Many artists, including Julie Mehretu and Ugo Rondinone and his partner, John Giorno (whom Dee represents), have already migrated north. Dee is confident other galleries will follow, whether big operations in search of satellite spaces or smaller ones like her own that are getting priced out of downtown. She has also



HOT SPOT | Elizabeth Dee in her new gallery on Fifth Avenue and 126th Street, with Carl Ostendarp’s 1992 foam painting *What’s Next to the Moon*.

PHOTO: CAROLL TAVERAS FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

taken chances in her gallery program, often showing art by virtually unknown artists that was not obviously commercial. In 2010, Ryan McNamara, for instance, hung every “artwork” he’d made since early childhood and gave tours of his personal art history. Dee managed to sell the performance piece, comprising McNamara’s future performances of it along with the archive, to prominent collectors Philip and Shelley Fox Aarons. In McNamara’s next show, Dee sold hundreds of small pieces decoupage with photos he’d taken of gallery visitors, each for a few thousand dollars. “So now hundreds of collectors have something by Ryan McNamara in their collections,” she says. “That’s game-changing.”

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Chelsea had its advantages in the aughts, being what Dee calls a “cultural campus,” pre-High Line and condo frenzy. But when she wanted to mount a comprehensive exhibition of the work of seminal African-American conceptual artist Adrian Piper in 2010, she had to rent an entire floor of Dia’s old building because her quarters were so cramped. Fast-rising real estate prices, driven in part by behemoths such as Gagosian, David Zwirner, Pace and Hauser & Wirth, made expansion prohibitive.

In Harlem, Dee has increased her space sixfold. She now has the luxury of staging multiple exhibits simultaneously and is christening the gallery with a group show, as well as the first of a series she has dubbed Research. This periodic series is meant to bridge the gap between a gallery show of new work and a scholarly museum retrospective by focusing on a single key period for an artist. Works may not even be for sale. The inaugural subject is mixed-media artist Annette Lemieux; Research shows on Piper and on Joan Wallace are upcoming.



OPTICAL REVOLUTIONS | Contemporary pieces that will be exhibited by Dee at her new space include Philippe Decrauzat’s painting *Flag* (2015). PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ELIZABETH DEE, NEW YORK

“These are not emerging artists,” Dee says. “This is a way to go deep.”