

Manhattan's Lower East Side blooming with art galleries

BY BLAKE GOPNIK

It is not news, at least in the art world, that there's a gallery scene on Manhattan's Lower East Side. It is news that, as of this spring, that scene seems to have finally, fully arrived. Washingtonians spending Memorial Day weekend in New York could do worse than to head to the Lower East Side — the downtown neighborhood east of the Bowery, south of Houston Street — and take in its art.

For a decade or more, the area's few galleries have been known for wacky, street-inspired work, often built on kiddie clichés of artistic rebellion. (A lot of doodling; a big dose of acid-trip "self-expression"; not a crisp line in sight.) A recent visit showed that at the same time as the scene has grown, its art has grown up.

Most of the neighborhood's 40-odd galleries are in former storefronts, so they aren't anything like as huge as the deluxe galleries across the island in Chelsea. (Though Chelsea-ites are moving east — Lehmann Maupin gallery now has a polished Lower East Side annex, and Sperone Westwater has announced its move to

a grand new home on the Bowery that is almost finished.) Unlike most Chelsea galleries, which can tend toward spectacle and bombast, Lower East Side art spaces are human-scaled and, at their best, tend to show humane art whose ambitions are subtle.

Whereas even a good day in the mega-galleries of Chelsea can feel like a chore, with returns that don't quite merit the labor, an almost fruitless art tour of the Lower East Side can feel like time well-enough spent. Maybe that's part of the place's charm: Chelsea feels like it's designed to offer gold-plated investment opportunities; the Lower East Side, though its art is rarely as good, feels like it's out to provide pleasure.

Worse comes to worst, even when faced with irredeemable junk — and there will still be days like that on the Lower East Side — you can drown your aesthetic sorrows in one of the neighborhood's endless bars and restaurants, or recharge your batteries with a touch of hipster shopping.

Here are a few of the better venues and shows visited on a recent trip to the Lower East Side.



COURTESY OF LMAKPROJECTS

Penelope Umbrico's "Zenith Replacement parts, eBay."

hoping to prove that even though their objects' screens are trashed, the electronics behind them are still good for parts. As the gallery puts it, "Umbrico collapses the obsolescence and breakdown of new technology with the aesthetic formalism of utopian Modernist abstraction." And one of the screens shows a shattered image from Hello Kitty, which can't be a bad thing.

Another Umbrico piece presents a grid of little photographs of cardboard boxes; they evoke the plywood solids of Donald Judd or the sleek cubes of Sol LeWitt. In fact, they are the pointless photographs that sellers of television parts post on eBay, as though showing the outside of a cardboard box is somehow proof of the goods it contains. At 139 Eldridge St. through June 20. Call 212-255-9707 or visit www.lmakprojects.com.

● **LMAKprojects** is a small space that has heft. Founded in Chelsea five years ago, it moved to the Lower East Side in 2008. The gallery's latest show, titled "As Is," presents images garnered from eBay by the conceptual artist Penelope Umbrico. One series of photographs looks like prismatic abstractions, with some pop-art elements thrown in. In fact, they are enlarged details from the images that sellers of broken LCD televisions include in their listings, hop-