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Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now



Some of the works in "Downtown 2021": clockwise from foreground, a sculpture by Helen Evans Ramsaran; a collaborative fabric piece by Polly Apfelbaum, Madeline Hollander and Zak Kitnick; a sculpture by Elisabeth Kley; and on the wall, from left, works by J. Stoner Blackwell, Adrienne Rubenstein, Michelle Grabner and Frederick Weston. Gregory Carideo

"Downtown 2021" pays homage to artists from more than two dozen galleries; Carmen Herrera's Paris period reveals zigzag lines and textures.

New York City art galleries form a resilient and irrepressible ecosystem, one that has survived recessions, gentrification, at least one hurricane, and now an aggressive pandemic. Through everything, the system continues to sprout new life. The group show "Downtown 2021," curated by the artist Sam Gordon, pays homage to this phenomenon by giving more than two dozen galleries their hardscrabble props.

The show's title is adapted from Edo Bertoglio's "Downtown 81," a film about the 1980s art-and-club scene in the East Village, La MaMa Galleria's longtime neighborhood. But as

surveyed by Gordon, “downtown” is expansive terrain, encompassing not just Manhattan but also Brooklyn and Queens. More than that, the word describes an attitude, one that blends a pull toward independence with a commitment to community.

The show, assembled from work by artists who have been included in current or recent exhibitions, opens with references to communal watering holes, old and new: the Stonewall Inn in the 1960s West Village, and Beverly’s, a popular artists’ bar on the Lower East Side that shuttered during the coronavirus lockdown last summer. Among the 25 galleries represented, Gordon includes a feminist landmark (A.I.R., founded in SoHo in 1972, now in Dumbo, Brooklyn), a veteran Chelsea-based enterprise (Luhring Augustine, which has branches in Bushwick and TriBeCa), and a number of new or newish spaces, most artist-run, among them Soloway, Orgy Park, Elijah Wheat Showroom, Gloria’s, Songs for Presidents, and ZAK’S.

What counts in any group show, no matter the theme, is what’s on the wall and the floor, and there’s a lot of good work here, much of it small-scale sculpture. Highlights include an openwork bronze piece by the unaccountably underrecognized Helen Evans Ramsaran (who shows at Welancora in Bedford-Stuyvesant); a gameboard-like parquetry of brass and copper panels by Zak Kitnick; a sardonic 20-year anniversary memorial to Sept. 11 by Leah Dixon; and a sweet, smart tribute by Polly Apfelbaum — a ceramic wall piece suggesting a string of prayer beads — to the gallerist Amy Lipton, who died last December and was herself very much a downtown type.

And to get a sense of how tightly knit the downtown art world is, it’s useful to know that Apfelbaum recently exhibited at ZAK’S in Brooklyn, which is also Kitnick’s studio; and that Dixon, who shows at Gloria’s in Ridgewood, Queens, was a co-founder of Beverly’s (which will reopen this spring as a performance and exhibition space). As it happens, Gordon himself runs a Manhattan gallery in partnership another artist, Jacob Robichaux, who has shown at Orgy Park (Brooklyn) and has a delicately tensile 3-D painting made from thread, pins and staples, on display here. A few of the show’s artists have exhibitions currently on view elsewhere. There’s a survey of work by Frederick Weston (1946-2020) at Ortuzar Projects in TriBeCa through Feb. 13, and the photographer D’Angelo Lovell Williams is doubling up as a curator of a group show at Higher Pictures Generation in Brooklyn.

Add to all this an online video program courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix and archive of information on all the artists compiled by Wendy’s Subway, a Bushwick-based independent publisher, and you’ve got a rich map of downtown: present, future, perpetual.