

How far can it go before it pops? With a market bulging like an overinflated Macy's Parade balloon on the verge of bursting, cultural soothsayers are scanning recent events, like the entrails of a sacrificial chicken, for clues to its future direction.

Peddling north on Bedford, the Indian summer sun is setting as I pass the North 7th Street subway exit. The L train disgorges its homeward bound hoards while a twitchy hipster works the crowd, panhandling for a dose of boutique cappuccino. "If I don't get a caffeine fix soon, it's not gonna be pretty - can you spare \$4.50 for a soy latte?" A pathetic case of a caffeine jones, or an absurdist slice of street theater slyly goading the changing demographics of central Williamsburg?

If you've ever thought there was "independence" or "divergent opinions" within the mainstream commercial art press, open your eyes. The November issues of ARTFORUM and Art in America are marching in lockstep, each boasting paintings by Mary Heilmann on their covers. Even more remarkable is that the two paintings, which appear to be from the same series, when placed side by side seem to create yet another painting: a whimsical art mag readymade implying that those who call the tune have finally elevated Heilmann to "blue-chip" status. Mary, triple your life insurance and prepare for that solo show at Gagolian.

Plywood fences surrounding condo tower construction sites are all too common throughout the Bedford/Metropolitan sector of the 'burg. Developers and brokers have displaced sizable populations of the local artsy crowd, who have come to view them with fear and dread. But in Chelsea, when the plywood came down after a two-year project on West 25th Street, we were greeted by a twenty-story, gleamingly severe sliver that embodied a challenging new coalition, the unapologetic melding of culture and commerce. With the Chelsea Arts Tower, the developers Grubb & Ellis Company have, with crucial input from several galleries (including Marlborough), harnessed two demon-dogs-the art and real estate markets-and unleashed a lethal model for future incursions into cultural enclaves. If, as reported in the New York Times, the average floor is going for about \$3 million, the entire building is worth almost as much as the recently auctioned Rothko painting, "White Center (Yellow, Pink, Lavender on Rose)" (1950). With the Chelsea Arts Towers, the mask is pulled back, and long whispered rumors are confirmed: ART HAS BECOME A FRONT FOR THE REAL ESTATE BUSINESS. And for you creative types, the question of survival becomes assimilation or annihilation.

With its ever-burgeoning development, Williamsburg faces a cold future, something out of Fritz Lang's Metropolis. Yet I can't help but ask: if the artists made the area desirable, what will be its attraction once they, along with their galleries, theaters and clubs, have all been pushed out? Just take a look at DUMBO,

where over the last decade many longtime artists and residents have been priced out of the zone and architectural excesses now dominate the massive bridge anchorages. But despite this steroidal boom, a few developers with insight and a view toward the future have seen the advantages of maintaining at least an appearance of artsy inclusiveness.

David Walentas has a vision for DUMBO and, despite being the area's biggest developer, that vision includes a hefty dose of cultural amenities. For over a decade he has subsidized rents for two of Brooklyn's most provocative publicly funded arts spaces, the Dumbo Arts Center and Smack Mellon Gallery. Under his patronage, the St. Ann's Warehouse has become one of New York City's hottest off-Broadway theaters. 111 Front Street (another Walentas property), with its two-story plate glass entrance and the word "GALLERIES" emblazoned on an orange wall, could be mistaken for a wayward chunk of Chelsea that somehow plopped down here in Brooklyn. A run through its second floor revealed no fewer than twenty-five galleries and design studios, and though a number of them exude a "commercial" ambiance, at least we've been spared "Blue Dog" or "Thomas Kinkade" galleries (so far).

I dropped by **Smack Mellon** on a recent sunny Sunday. Its impressive space and huge windows facing the East River provided a perfect setting for the installation New Monuments to My Love Life by Peter Dudek. Filling the main gallery area, this piece seems to parody many of the neighboring interior design stores and architectural firms with its accumulations of Danish Modern tables, biomorphic shapes cut from laminated wood or hollow core doors, and driftwood "sculptures." The matte sheen of Formica, in warm-toned designer shades, projects an early sixties optimism recalling Southern California and the unconsummated promises of Camelot. In one grouping, the artist takes a large table, representing an institutional version of modernist functionality, and places a smaller table, with slender square metal legs, on top. Nondescript sculptural elements between the legs break up the furniture's strict horizontal/vertical lines, and increasingly smaller tables are added until the stack ascends several feet above eye level. The whole assemblage is topped off with a heap of precariously balanced wooden cutouts that reads like a goofball response to the engineering challenge represented by the Manhattan Bridge tower visible through the gallery windows. With Monuments, Dudek provides a view of utopian design stripped of its self-righteous, modernist moralizing by anarchic, obsessive humor and reduced to a punchy design/architectural motif that resonates like the melody of a fractured Burt Bacharach tune.

Next door at Dumbo Arts Center, curators Dean Daderko and Marina Adams have collected works for yet another exhibition dealing with SEX. Perhaps the appeal of Daderko and Adams' Sex in the City, once you shake off the "nasty" factor, is its pervasive sense of the quotidian. Take a slideshow of photos by Jayson Keeling that depicts various young males, sometimes alone, sometimes paired with male lovers. While Feminists have long critiqued the heterosexual male gaze, Keeling presents the less-explored gay male gaze, and his focus on the well-defined, muscular torsos of African-American and Latino hunks is refreshing for its sensitive portrayal of individuals and their flush moods, despite the randy content.

Marilyn Minter contributes two paintings on aluminum. "White Cotton Panties" (1994), the more articulate and satisfying of the two, is a crotch shot blow-up focusing on a voluptuous, barely contained female pubic mound. Leaving a wide margin of bare aluminum as a framing device, Minter uses drippy flesh-tones as a base upon which she applies photo-silkscreen. There's a thickness to the screened dots, utilized and manipulated by licking, runny brushstrokes, that reinforces the painterly qualities of the photo elements in contrast to the hard metallic surface. The pictorial irony of panties reduced to little more than a white band stretched over succulent swells of pubic hair, all photographically rendered on an unyielding metal surface, is a cagey and sophisticated study of content in opposition to means.

Marina Adams, one of the curators, is showing what might at first sight be considered straight abstractions. In "Venus in the Sky with Diamonds" (2007), interlocking shapes in shades of green, gray and salmon recall camouflage patterns; over this Adams lays the thick contours of what could be a copulating couple. Cropped and simplified with the spareness of a Japanese woodcut, these starkly diagrammatic figures present a subtle subversion and musky tang to apparently high-minded art.

Narrow shelves, filled with quirky small sculptures like artifacts from a cartoon cargo cult, line a section of beige wall. Below, a lean-to of rough shingles echoes the theme of tropical "primitiveness." In this untitled installation from 2007 by The Third Leg with Leidy Churchman and Sam Lopes, simple groupings of painted branch cuttings, lashed sticks, and tufts of grass become effigies of post-coital couples, complete with smoldering cigarettes and horny dogs; a skein of grungy black hair hangs like a trophy pubic wig above a small bottle of hair dye; and what could be phallic prosthetics or sadomasochistic implements, crudely fashioned from rope and fabric, are displayed on a rack like souvenirs for sex tourists crafted by a TV-worshipping post-stone age tribe.

Also included in this exhibition are A.K. Burns, Boris Torres, Chitra Ganesh, Donnie & Travis, Edie Fake and Dewayne Slightweight, David Humphrey, Kathe Burkhart, Mickalene Thomas, Suzanne McClelland, Ulrike Müller, Vanessa Chimera and Will Villalongo.