

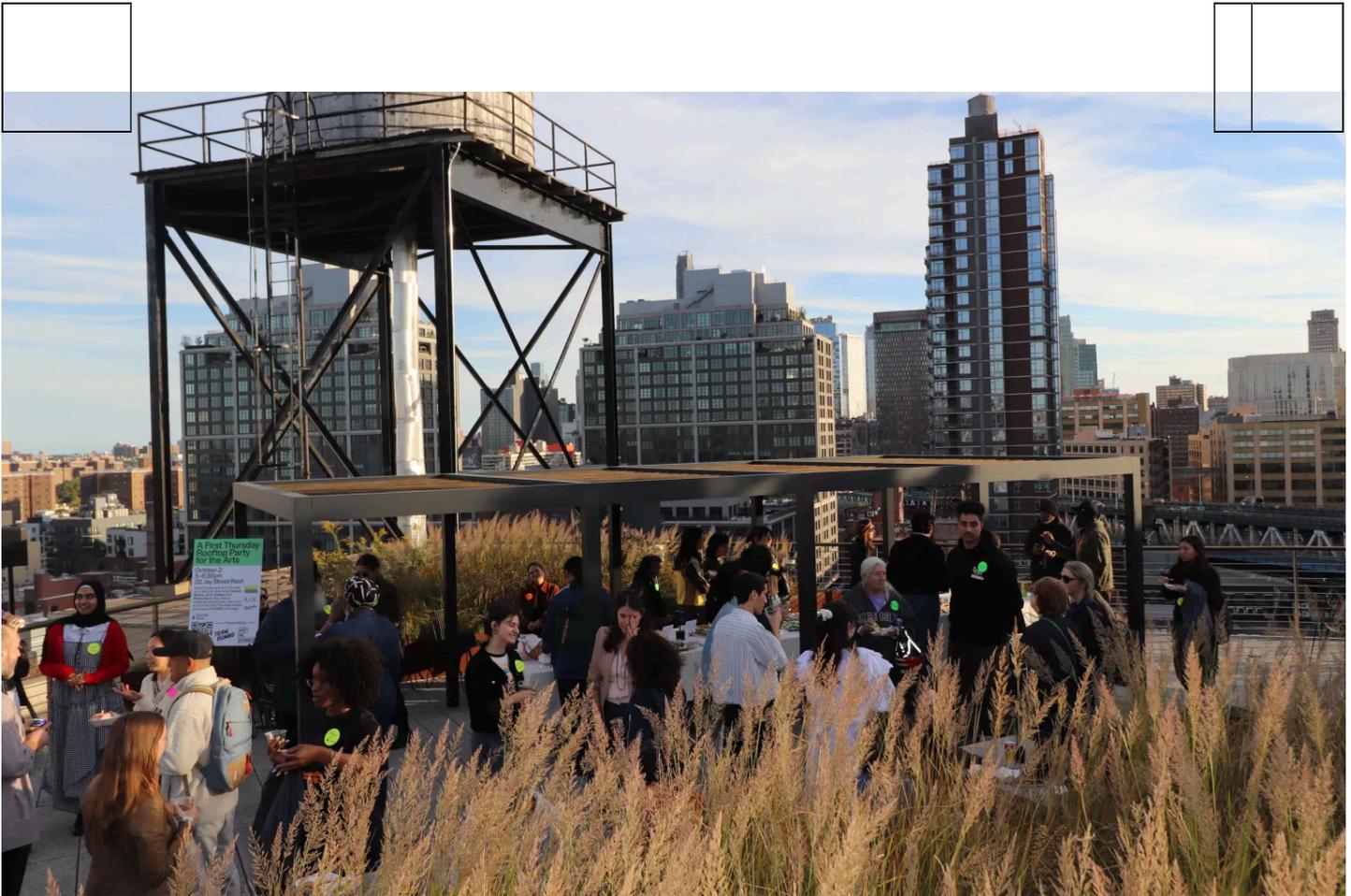
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ARTS • GALLERIES

Under the Bridge, Beyond the Gloss: DUMBO's Art Scene Defies Its Gentrified Image

The most recent First Thursday Gallery Walk revealed how the neighborhood's artist-run spaces, residencies and collectives are sustaining a sometimes overlooked but deeply dynamic art scene.

By [Elisa Carollo](#) • 10/28/25 3:45pm



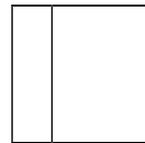
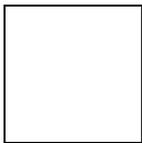
The Art in DUMBO Rooftop Party, celebrating the First Thursday Gallery Walk. Courtesy Arts in DUMBO

Most New Yorkers, when they think of DUMBO, picture the glossy waterfront neighborhood it is today—one of the most visibly gentrified corners of Brooklyn. Yet it wasn't long ago that this same stretch of land went from marshy shoreline to manufacturing powerhouse to an industrial wasteland of abandoned factories, only to be reborn at breakneck speed into a playground of luxury condos, boutique retail, design firms and destination dining and hospitality.



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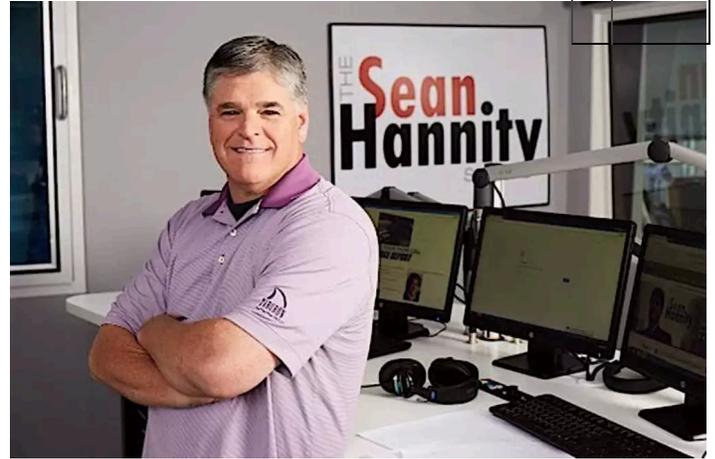
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The man behind that transformation was developer David Walentas of Two Trees Management, who in the early 2000s began buying up old warehouses and refitting them into sleek residential, commercial and mixed-use spaces. As Manhattan real estate prices ballooned, the neighborhood rebranded DUMBO (“Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass”) became the next frontier for creative, tech and media firms looking for space with cachet and skyline views. The gritty brick warehouses became galleries and offices; the factories became cafés and lofts. But with that transformation came the inevitable consequences: rising rents that pushed out many of the artists and longtime residents who gave DUMBO its vibrancy.

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I live in Bushwick, so I rarely make it to DUMBO; for me, it's a one-hour trip that loops through Manhattan. As such, I hadn't really understood how much the neighborhood's art scene had expanded since the pandemic. I was familiar with the major residency programs like the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program, Triangle Arts and the New York Studio School, but not the many new spaces that have opened. For the curious, See Saw hasn't added DUMBO to its listings yet, but the Art in DUMBO website fills that gap with an impressively detailed, regularly updated online map of exhibitions and other happenings. The group behind the lists also hosts DUMBO Open Studios and a monthly First Thursday Gallery Walk, which is a great way to discover this overlooked scene that is quietly flourishing across galleries, organizations and artist studios.



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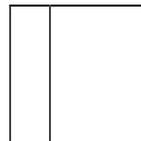
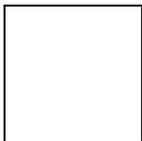
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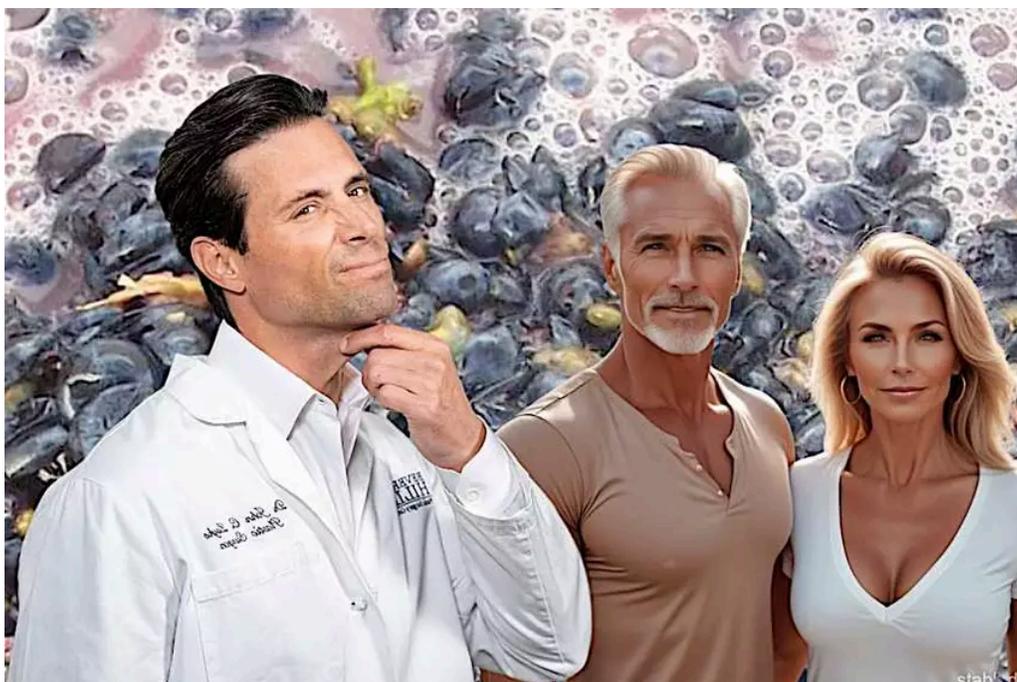
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I went to the latest iteration of the First Thursday walk, which had a full itinerary highlighting galleries, artist studios, organizations and other creative spaces clustered mostly between Plymouth Street and Jay Street. It was full of discoveries and encounters that made the trek through Manhattan more than worth it.





The night began with a rooftop cocktail party atop the Jay 20 building, which has become a cornerstone of DUMBO's art community and a microcosm of the neighborhood's transformation from industrial hood to creative hub. The building not only hosts residencies but also nearly 200 artists in programs and independent studios, along with other intriguing and often singular spaces (including the only gallery able to showcase Cuban creativity despite the effects of the U.S. embargo).



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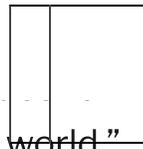
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"Today, Dumbo is a vibrant hub for the arts, home to more than 170 artist studios and 20 galleries, including renowned institutions like Smack Mellon and A.I.R. Gallery," explained Ariel Willmott, cultural affairs director for both the Walentas Family Foundation and Two Trees Management Co., when we met on the rooftop. "Public art initiatives—including the Dumbo Projection Project, neighborhood murals and installations presented by the Public Art Fund in Brooklyn Bridge Park—have helped shape the neighborhood into a dynamic cultural environment. While other New York



enrich galleries, museums and cultural institutions both locally and around the world.”

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Willmott shared some concrete figures: the Two Trees Artists + Galleries Portfolio in DUMBO encompasses 52 studios spanning 61,000 square feet, along with seven galleries totaling 14,000 square feet and six artist residencies covering 28,000 square feet. Of this, 17,000 square feet is leased to 18 artists at subsidized rates through the Cultural Space Subsidy Program, while 13,000 square feet is dedicated to the Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program, which provides 17 artists with free studio space for one year.

At the rooftop event, I also met several of the cultural producers behind these organizations. Among them was Photoville, the nonprofit behind New York City's free, open-air photography festival held each June. Originally rooted in DUMBO, its "Photo Village" began as a cluster of repurposed shipping containers arranged beneath the Brooklyn Bridge to transform the waterfront into an immersive outdoor gallery.



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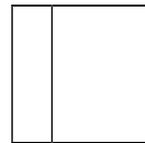
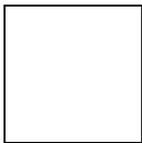
Now approaching its 15th anniversary, Photoville has expanded beyond DUMBO into all five boroughs with satellite exhibitions in public parks, plazas and cultural venues across the city. The second edition of its New York Proud Campaign, presented in partnership with the New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC), celebrates the vibrant and diverse stories of immigrants who define the city's character. This year's campaign brings those narratives to life through 15 large-scale photographic portraits installed in public spaces, including Queens Public Library at Hunters Point (through Oct. 31), the Plaza at 300 Ashland (through Nov. 6), Van Cortlandt Park Track (through Nov. 17) and Staten Island's St. George Ferry Terminal. In today's national climate, it reaffirms the indispensable role of immigrants in shaping New York's identity, from building its past to propelling its future.



Armando Guadalupe Cortés, “Dead Parrot Radio” at Smack Mellon. Photo: Etienne Frossard | Image courtesy of Smack Mellon

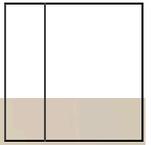
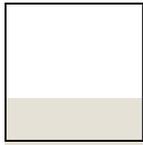
From there, I headed to Smack Mellon, one of DUMBO’s cornerstone nonprofit art spaces—artist-founded and steadfastly independent. For nearly three decades, it has served as an incubator for risk, experimentation and visibility, giving artists without market access the resources to realize ambitious, large-scale projects unconstrained by the commercial gallery system. Founded in 1995 by artist Andrea Reynosa and musician Kevin Vertrees, the organization began in their loft at 135 Plymouth Street and spent its early years staging exhibitions in a series of donated industrial spaces—including a former rubber factory at 81 Washington Street and a spice factory at 56 Water Street—supported by the Walentas/Two Trees network. In 2005, Smack Mellon settled into its permanent home at 92 Plymouth Street, across from Brooklyn Bridge Park—a converted 1880s boiler house redesigned by Sage & Coombe Architects into an open-format exhibition space capable of hosting museum-scale installations alongside artist studios and public programs.

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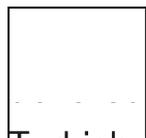


Two ambitious multimedia installations were on view, both exploring how new technologies are reshaping how we relate to each other and to the world around us. In “Dead Parrot Radio,” Mexican American artist Armando Guadalupe Cortés constructs a dystopian network of communication devices—radios, televisions, cellular towers—that reflect the interference and breakdown of connection in a supposedly globalized, hyperconnected world. His sculptural and sonic installation unfolds as a performance environment, drawing parallels between animal and human migration—moments when native and invasive species collide, unable to communicate, suspended in disorientation, unable to find their way back.

In the adjacent gallery, “For Those Who Share Mornings and Evenings” by Chang Yuchen offers a quieter, more intimate reflection on how technology mediates love and memory. Her two-channel video installation pairs screenshots collected by her late husband—digital traces of the long-distance moments they shared—with a dream archive she transcribed years later. The result is a deeply personal meditation on distance and loss, where mediated intimacy generates a fragile connection that endures beyond presence.



“Sitting in Silence: The Chair Show 01” at ZAROLAT. Photo: Jack deMarzo



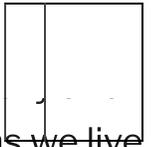
Turkish architect and furniture designer Zeynep Arolat, the space operates at the intersection of disciplines as a hybrid studio, gallery and design collective.

In opening her gallery, Arolat—a DUMBO resident for 13 years who has witnessed the neighborhood's transformation—was inspired by nearby creative ventures such as Hudson Wilder, Viso Project (no longer based there) and Natural Selections, all of which opened around the same time. “I always knew that I wanted to have a space to showcase unique art and design pieces by independent artists, designers and makers, including my own furniture pieces,” she told Observer. “Opening the studio/gallery space is my way of getting outside my apartment after years of prioritizing architectural projects and client work as an independent design studio, mostly by myself.”

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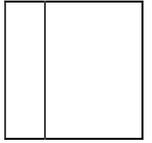
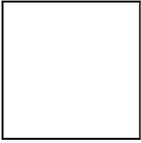
Arolat avoids labeling ZAROLAT strictly as a gallery because it also houses her design studio and hosts multilayered events such as art talks, book launches and food gatherings. Her curatorial approach emphasizes materiality and craftsmanship, guided by her architectural background. “I design each exhibition by drawing a plan and placing items in my 3D, to make sure everything works as a whole within the space in terms of scale and creates a balance with their materiality/concept,” she explained.

The exhibition “Sitting in Silence: The Chair Show 01” is a thoughtful study of one of humanity's most ordinary yet symbolic objects, the chair. Through archival imagery and



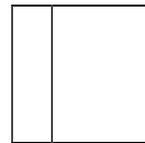
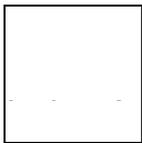
anthropologically. A chair, after all, is both form and body: it reflects the systems we live within, the spaces we inhabit and the roles we play. Works on view include pieces by Sublime Studios, Jisu Han Jung, Maite Santos Alcocer, Zeynep Arkan, Graine Studio, Alejandro Avaikan and Zarolat Studio.

ZAROLAT's audience has grown organically over time. "We are growing every day, from being the designer, I now have interior designers as clients. Of course, individual collectors are a big part of our audience, which we are working to reach more of. It takes time to find the right people to get in there," Arolat said. "Our local creative community is a permanent audience that is also growing every day."



Maxine Henryson's "Once Again I Fall Into My Feminine Ways" at A.I.R. Gallery. Courtesy of A.I.R. Gallery | Photo: Matthew Sherman

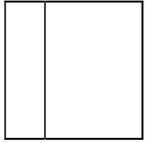
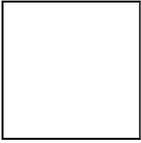
Crossing the intersection of Jay Street to the next block, I arrived at A.I.R. Gallery (155 Plymouth), a longtime cornerstone of DUMBO's art scene. Founded in 1972, A.I.R. was the first nonprofit, artist-run gallery in the U.S. devoted to women artists. Today, it remains an experimental, alternative space dedicated to showcasing the work of women and non-binary artists. "For over fifty years, A.I.R. has been a shelter in the storm for women artists in a culture slow to change," A.I.R.'s executive director,



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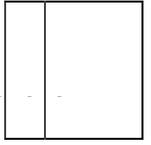
On view is an exhibition of photographs by A.I.R. New York member Maxine Henryson, shot in Europe and the United States between 1995 and 2025. The works blur the boundaries between analog immediacy and digital manipulation, creating abstract visual moments that, like memory itself, are shaped more by sensation than by fact. Influenced by Rabindranath Tagore's early 20th-century poem *Where the Mind is Without Fear*, the show becomes a meditation on autobiography, memory, cultural history and place, examining how images can translate those intersections. Through an alternating rhythm of blur and focus, clarity and dissolution, Henryson invites viewers to consider the layered complexities of personal and collective memory.

In the adjoining galleries, A.I.R. presents multimedia work by Abbey Williams, an inaugural recipient of the gallery's new Commissioning Program for Mid-Career Women and Non-Binary Artists. Her exhibition, *Until I Get It Together*, uses sound, video and silence to reflect on what it means to be a mid-career Black woman artist today—both within and beyond the art world—challenging stereotypes and reframing narratives of Black femmehood, cultural memory and visibility. At its center is Nina Simone's 1976 performance of Janis Ian's *Stars* at the Montreux Jazz Festival, a raw, elegiac meditation on artistic decline, endurance and legacy.



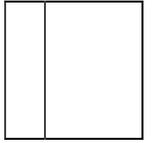
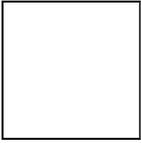
Abbey Williams's "Until I Get It Together" at A.I.R. Gallery. Courtesy of A.I.R. Gallery | Photo: Matthew Sherman

Next door, Usagi NY presented an exhibition of abstract calligraphy by Noriko Iwasaka. Using traditional techniques, Iwasaka explored the concept of Do (道), the Japanese notion of a spiritual and emotional path that transcends technical mastery. The gallery itself, designed by Sou Fujimoto, is a neighborhood gem—a hybrid of art space, library and café that extends Japanese aesthetics across disciplines.



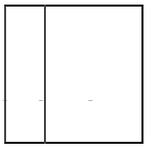
space dedicated to SAORI weaving, a Japanese practice centered on freedom, spontaneity and improvisation. Opening that evening was “Living Indigo from Kyoto,” a solo exhibition by Riku Matsuzaki, an indigo artisan known for collaborations with brands like Moleskine. His work revives Kyo-ai, Kyoto’s nearly forgotten indigo-dyeing tradition, rooted in harmony between human craft and natural processes. Using only water, wood ash and organically grown tade-ai (Japanese indigo), Matsuzaki’s fermentation process transforms liquid into luminous blue hues. Through beeswax and resist-dyeing techniques, he unveils an unseen microbial world—offering a poetic vision of creation in symbiotic collaboration with nature.

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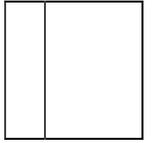
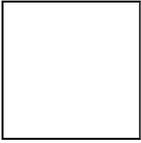
Loop of the Loom's opening of Riku Matsuzaki's "Living Indigo from Kyoto." Courtesy Arts in DUMBO

Taking a parallel street from Plymouth, I came across Stump Gallery, a new artist-run space that opened in September, improbably housed within a wide corridor staircase leading to a cluster of studios—including a wood-carving workshop—at 70 John Street. The gallery is run by an artist couple who, as founder and co-director William H. Blomquist told Observer, struggled to find the kind of gallery they wanted to see, so they decided to build it themselves. "On John Street, where the air hums with the residue of the Con Edison plant and the Manhattan Bridge looms like a monument to



growth. Ideas and practices pushing through the cracks of the city's surface.”

Blomquist described Stump Gallery as an experiment in restraint. “We take a hands-off approach, allowing the work to stand unmediated, to breathe without the imposition of curatorial ego or institutional polish,” he said. “We are less interested in asserting a brand than in making room for something to happen, for meaning to form through context, through history, through the viewer’s encounter.” In a moment when much feels overdetermined and overexplained, Stump Gallery was founded on a belief in the slow emergence of things in art as a form of renewal, rooted in the underground and reaching for light.



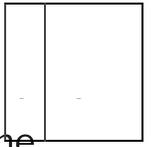
Mindaugas Matulis's "What Time Is It?" at Stump Gallery. Courtesy Stump Gallery

Judging by the debut, it's clear they have an eye for the "mergence of things" and for talent. For their inaugural exhibition, they're presenting the first New York solo show of Mindaugas Matulis, a Lithuanian-Swiss artist currently completing his MFA at Hunter College. His small, screen-format canvases pulse with cinematic tension and psychological charge, occupying an uneasy space between experience and fiction. Through texture and blur, Matulis captures time not as a line but as a loop of history unfolding in real time at a velocity that often, and alarmingly, defies comprehension. His



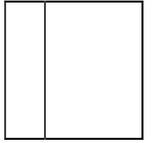
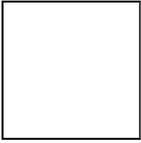
quietly seeps into private life. In these intimate paintings, at times reminiscent of Issy Wood, the mediascape and the everyday collide and overlap, suggesting a parallel current of personal and collective narratives that ultimately collapse into one as the weight of history implodes within the fiction of prosperity that defines contemporary life in the Western world.

Mindaugas Matulis captures time not as a linear progression but as a looping narrative. Courtesy Stump Gallery



Hiroshi Masuda presented his latest works, created during his residency with the NowHere Studio Program. Masuda's practice centers on the Japanese concept of *mitate* (, "seeing anew"), which informs his reappropriation and reinterpretation of visual fragments drawn from sources as varied as pop culture, manga, Buddhism and traditional motifs. This eclectic mix of references merges into a syncretic whole that captures the essence of today's global media culture, reflecting the oversaturation and dislocation of meaning that emerge from the endless circulation of images.

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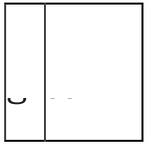


Works by Hiroshi Masuda in his studio. Photo: Elisa Carollo for Observer

One floor down, Spring Projects presented a show that captured the experience of urban life in perpetual, often overwhelming flux from a distinctly New York perspective by inviting participating artists to intervene on an NYC subway map. The resulting works were as clever as they were absurd, perfectly encapsulating the bewildering and often comic reality of navigating the city's transit system—never quite sure if a train will stay on track or on time and always open to unpredictable encounters with the city's vast urban fauna and surreal cast of characters. In this improvisational mix of



we could all just be cats?"

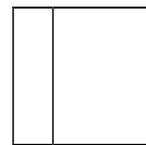


A work in "Subway Riders" at Spring Projects. Photo: Elisa Carollo for Observer

One of the most intriguing discoveries on the floor was the Cuban Art Space, one of DUMBO's longest-standing cultural anchors, with a singular story and mission. It remains the only space in the United States to have successfully countered the decades-long embargo, securing the right to legally collect, exhibit and sell Cuban art. Founded in 1972 by journalist and activist Sandra Levinson, the center occupies Suite 301 and regularly presents exhibitions of both established and emerging Cuban artists, from Havana-based painters and



exchange without being classified as a commercial entity.

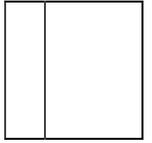
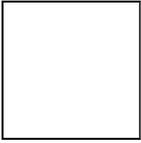


In the 1990s, however, the center entered a landmark legal battle with the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which at the time classified Cuban artworks as "goods" subject to embargo restrictions. The Center challenged this, arguing that original works of art constitute expressive speech protected by the First Amendment. With the support of lawyers and cultural advocates, the case set a legal precedent exempting art from trade sanctions, making the import and sale of Cuban art legally permissible. This ruling not only reshaped how cultural institutions could engage with Cuba but, in an ironic twist, continues to serve as a loophole today: even after the Trump administration imposed tariffs on nearly everything else entering the country, art remained untouched, protected by the same constitutional clause that once allowed Cuban art to slip past the embargo.

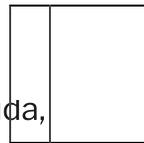
The show on view during the First Thursday art walk examined how these iconic figures continue to inspire and influence new generations of Cuban artists, presenting a dialogue between past and present through documents, posters and paintings that reveal how these heroes and the ideals they represent endure through creative expression across the island. But other studios and events were also unfolding throughout the building, including a group book launch and exhibition titled "Dreamscapes" at Lucky Risograph (20 Jay Street, Suite 217), featuring works by Chenxin Luo, Chenyi Luo, Xinyi Yang and Qin Shen. Meanwhile, at New York Studio School Projects (Suite 307), a live set unfolded alongside an open-studio showcase, with Paul Mandia on guitar among several performing artists.

Taken together, the range and caliber of offerings on a single Thursday made it clear that art in DUMBO is very much alive and even flourishing after the pandemic. The neighborhood continues to serve as a vital Brooklyn counterpart to the intensity of Tribeca and Chelsea, offering space for community-based, nonprofit formats and artist-run initiatives that grow from the ground up and, crucially, keep the focus on the artists themselves—often long before any market forms around them.

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Cuban Art Space is the only organization able to legally collect, exhibit and sell Cuban art in the States. Photo: Elisa Carollo for Observer



Arolat, Maxine Henryson, Abbey Williams, Noriko Iwasaka, Riku Matsuzaki, Hiroshi Masuda, William H. Blomquist, Ray Steele, Mindaugas Matulis, Sandra Levinson, Andrea Reynosa, Kevin Vertrees, Cate Holt, Tommy White, Paul Mandia, Art In DUMBO, Center For Cuban Studies, Cuban Art Space, Loop Of The Loom, Lucky Risograph, NowHere Studio Program, Spring Projects, Stump Gallery, Triangle Arts, Usagi NY, ZAROLAT, Ariel Willmott, New York Studio School, Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program, Chang Yuchen, Smack Mellon, A.I.R. Gallery, David Walentas, Dumbo, Brooklyn, New York City, America (United States), New York, Two Trees Real Estate

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