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Taking the Spirit of Brooklyn on a Florida Vacation

By EDWARD M. GOMEZ

LAKE WORTH, Fla. It is no secret that Brooklyn's art scene has grown more active and visible since the mid-1980's, when artists, driven out of Manhattan by rising rents, began to move there.

Today, artists from around the world have settled in districts like Red Hook, Dumbo (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass), Greenpoint and especially Williamsburg. And tourists, museum curators and high-profile collectors make their way past Polish bakeries and laid-back cafes in search of Pierogi, Momenta Art and other must-see Brooklyn galleries that routinely attract attention from the international art press.

Now "Brooklyn!," an exhibition that just opened here at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art, is presenting an overview of the creativity that has been surging through the borough for which the show is exuberantly named. Stylistically diverse, the show of paintings, sculptures and mixed-media works by 86 artists remains on view through Nov. 25.

This recognition by a Florida institution is both timely and unexpected. It comes as the borough's enclaves of artists appear to be poised for the next big phase of their collective evolution. To be sure, for many years the Brooklyn Museum has offered smaller, occasional shows focusing on individual or small groups of artists who are based in the borough; in 1997 it presented "Current Undercurrent: Working in Brooklyn," a survey of some 200 artists' works organized in cooperation with local art outlets like Pierogi 2000 (as the gallery was then known), Momenta Art and Arena.

The Palm Beach show, however, is the first museum exhibition outside New York to examine the work of Brooklyn's new artists while also trying to evoke the special spirit of the place that inspired it. It is the spirit of a community whose members often say that they prize their outsider status — away, that is, from the pressures of Manhattan's art scene — and of a make-do ethos that has led some of them to set up their own galleries. The exhibition's organizers acknowledge that the Whitney Museum in

Edward M. Gomez is a research fellow in the National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University.



Cindy Karp for The New York Times

Manhattan might have been a more likely setting for "Brooklyn!," but they say that their distance from New York helps bring the special character of the work on view into sharper focus. Raleigh Caesar, the institute's principal art installer, said: "It's a Wizard of Oz idea. It's as if we lifted up a part of Brooklyn and dropped it here, complete with the spirit, the attitude and the art."

That this show landed in South Florida has much to do with the career and interests of Michael Rush, the institute's director. Mr. Rush, a trained psychologist, has been an experimental-theater director — he founded companies in New Haven and New York — an author and a Jesuit priest; until recently



Paulien Lethen, above, reconstructing Holland Tunnel, her gallery in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, for the exhibition "Brooklyn!" at the Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art. At left, Lee Boroson's sculpture "Tumid."

A Palm Beach museum gives a showcase to 86 artists from an evolving New York enclave.

he was a full-time Manhattanite, occasionally writing about art for *The New York Times*, Art in America and other publications.

"About a year ago I started at this job: New York's art scene is what I knew best, and because Brooklyn was still hot, it was a natural thing to do," he said.

He is presiding over a very young institution. Housed in a converted Art Deco movie theater built in 1939, just south of Palm Beach, the institute has been open since March 2000, presenting temporary exhibitions but maintaining no permanent collection. Its annual operating budget is only \$1.2 million.

Mr. Rush knew that the institute was in a part of Florida where retirees from the North, including former Brooklynites, had settled in large numbers. "Nathan's providing hot dogs for our opening, which honors its theme as well as a significant part of our local audience," Mr. Rush said.

He began working on the exhibition in collaboration with Dominique Nahas, a Manhattan-based independent curator and former director of the Neuberger Museum in Purchase, N.Y. With limited means for programming, Mr. Rush and his colleagues feel they have mounted a big exhibition with a resourcefulness that reflects the energy of the artists it celebrates. Larger, more bureaucracy-laden institutions can take years to assemble shows like "Brooklyn!," whose freshness can help put a new museum on the national contemporary-art map.

The converted movie palace's galleries include a boxy, high-ceilinged main hall and, tucked away on other levels, smaller, narrower corridors or rooms in which photographs, paintings and video works are displayed. Works on view range from the sculptor Lee Boroson's big, audacious, red-nylon inflatable tubes overtaking a hapless chair ("Tumid," 1995) to Jim Torok's meticulous miniature oil portraits of fellow artists. (They're slightly larger than cigarette packets.) The Dutch-born artist-dealer Paulien Lethen, the founder of Holland Tunnel, a

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gallery in a prefabricated potting shed that she placed in the back yard of her Williamsburg home, has even recreated that unusual, compact venue — shed and all — inside the institute. Ms. Lethen's show-within-a-show features, among other pieces, paintings on wood or canvas by artists like Bix Lye and Larry Webb.

"It's always hard — and risky — to put labels on such a diverse selection of art as this," Mr. Nahas said, but he added that in many of the works on view, "the artists have taken a low-tech approach to achieve certain 'high' effects." Often, he said, their materials have been modest or unconventional. "Much of their work reflects their delight in the act or process of making art and invites a viewer into the personal, private space in which an art object is carefully crafted."

To produce "A Simple Answer" (1999), Bruce Pearson applied oil

and acrylic paint to painstakingly cut and arranged pieces of Styrofoam. The work's large, textured tableau, with its intricate, vaguely psychedelic patterns, brings to mind ornate prayer rugs or ancient Eastern mandalas. Elsewhere, on a curved wall near the institute's interior stairwell, James Cullinane has used 30,000 map pins and plain steel tacks to create "Reef," a distorted-image drawing showing two children fighting over a ball.

In "Blocking Transport" (2000), Steven Charles, another painter, deployed long skeins of colored enamel to create a multilayered thicket of vertical and horizontal lines. It pulses with a joyous, frenetic energy. In contrast, Mary Carlson's "Giant Squid" (2001), a 17-foot-long garment made of hand-crocheted, yellowish yarn for an underwater creature that most people will never encounter in its natural environment (or their own), provides one of the show's peculiarly poetic moments. Much of Ms. Carlson's work refers to

the mysterious character of natural forces or to the energy exuded by living things. "I'm interested in giving visible form to what is normally invisible or intangible," she said.

"Rationalized" (2001), a work by Joe Amrhein, is also on view. In it, he used enamel to spell out words like "brazen" and "metaphoric" in various typefaces on strips of clear glass. During a recent interview at Pierogi, the gallery in Williamsburg that he founded in 1994, he recalled the current Brooklyn art scene's history.

Mr. Amrhein, who moved to New York from Los Angeles in 1989, said, "Brooklyn has been affordable; it has allowed artists and dealers to take the kinds of creative risks that would be harder for high-overhead Manhattan galleries even to consider." Mr. Amrhein echoed many of his Brooklyn-based peers when he noted that the community they have fostered has come to mean a lot to them personally as well as professionally.

"There's something Whitmanesque about it," Mr. Nahas said. "Living and working in a place full of history, diverse immigrant communities and a sense of itself as very open has inspired them." Singing

their borough eclectic, some of the "Brooklyn!" artists, like the photographer Richard Rothman, have taken its ordinary sights — backyard lots, the front of a house with a droopy picket fence — as their raw material. Some video works in the new-media section of the exhibition also take Brooklyn or aspects of its proliferating art scene as their subject.

Mr. Nahas said that if "Brooklyn!" reflects the vitality of an art-driven community's character at this time, it also captures something of its members' inventive, unshakable spirit, or what he called their "insouciant seriousness."

"Of course it will change," he said, noting that the dealer Jeffrey Deitch has just opened a Williamsburg branch of his well-known Deitch Projects gallery in SoHo.

Mr. Amrhein also senses change in the air. "Rents here have risen," he said, hinting that the prosperity artists have brought to their districts may force some of them to leave. But, he added, "If that happens, they'll just move a few more subway stops deeper into Brooklyn and start up something new again." □