

## Harlem Open Artist Studio Tour (HOAST)

Date: Sunday, October 7, 2007

Time: approximately 3-6pm

The Harlem Open Artist Studio Tour (HOAST) gave me an opportunity to see the inside of a few apartment buildings and meet people. I visited one building and five apartments, two of which were within our study area. This is the third year that this tour has been offered, and it ran yesterday and today.

Since I am recording these notes hours after the tour, I may have remembered some of the details incorrectly.

I saw an announcement for the Harlem Open Artist Studio Tour (HOAST) in Time Out New York, October 4-10 Issue 627 p 72[which immediately made me wonder if a great many white hipsters would show up]. The announcement read:

*FREE Harlem Open Artist Studio Tour Meet at 151 W. 122<sup>nd</sup> St, between Malcolm X Blvd (Lenox Ave) and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd (Seventh Ave) (hoast.org). Subway: 2, 3 to 12<sup>th</sup> St. Noon-6pm. Through Sun 7. Emerging and established visual artists open the doors to their uptown studios for the public to view.*

[The explaining of Malcolm X and Powell Blvds brought me back to one of my early jaunts on 125<sup>th</sup>, before this project began, when a confused-looking woman who could have been Mexican asked me where Eighth Ave was. I had no idea.] I did not view the website before attending, so I went to the starting point.

On my way to the starting point, I passed a young couple, comprised of a white male and an Asian American woman wearing trendy clothing. When I arrived at the starting point, I did not think this was the right place, since the building was under construction, although there was a poster for the event taped onto the black metal gate at the foot of the stairs. [This building was very near the Baby College office and the school where Baby College is held.]

When another couple, both white, walked up the stairs, I followed. A light-skinned "Hispanic"-looking man wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a tight blue long-sleeve top was sitting with a white woman on folding chairs set on a concrete floor. A small table holding paperwork sat in front of the man. The couple was drawn to the cello music coming from the rear of the building, but the man asked them to sign in. I waited with them, looking around the small first floor of exposed brick. The man explained that there were three floors of artwork, and that we had to sign in to acknowledge that the building was under construction. [I did not read what I was signing; I assume it released liability from the owner in case visitors should injure themselves.] He also gave me a map of the various studios on the tour.

117P

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523

176

After signing in I meandered down the room, looking at the artwork hanging on the brick walls. It looked as if a wall had been knocked out to create one long room. An Asian man with a Korean name (Yoon?) played the cello as I followed a thin, very pale white girl. A bunch of cards sat in a bowl at his feet, and a few had blown out of the bowl onto the floor. I followed the white girl to the open view of the back yard. Most of the yards were neat, with trimmed grass and plastic lawn chairs or other back-yardy accouterments. The house next door had a beautifully kept yard with flowers. I opened the map to view some of the other locations.

I wandered upstairs, where more white people were looking at paintings. A young boy was joyfully jumping up and down on the wood planks covering the floor, making a terrific racket that eventually got investigated by the Man. His mother, who sounded European (don't know what), was taking pictures of the artwork on the wall.

On the third floor a group of three or four middle-aged white people were talking boisterously. This floor was much smaller than the others, since a temporary wall was set against a large pile of I don't know what covered by heavy burlap sacking. [*Perhaps this was to keep people from falling out the back of the building.*] A staircase to a fourth floor was cordoned off with orange plastic fencing.

I returned to the first floor, where the man and woman were speaking with a couple that had just arrived. The sitting woman, who was one of the featured artists, also sounded European. The female guest, very dark-skinned and slender, struck me as familiar; I could not remember where I had met her. The Harlem Arts Alliance? Was she an artist? She was with a tall, "Hispanic"-looking man in a beret and white t-shirt. He was asking where you had to live to be considered a "Harlem artist," since he lived at 96<sup>th</sup> street. He said he was looking for an apartment and asked if they had heard of any openings for studios.

I had wanted to ask what would happen to this building, and then I saw a sign posted on the wall. I can't remember what exactly it said, but it mentioned a commitment to "affordable space" and alluded to the desirability and cheapness of Harlem real estate. When I went to speak with the hosts, the man had left. The woman couldn't speak much English, and told me a private owner offered to let HOAST use the space. She thought he intended to sell the place once the renovations were complete. She did not seem to understand my questions about affordability, that is, affordability for whom?

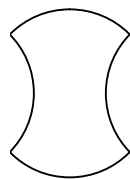
I then retreated to open up the map and plan my next stop. A prosperous-looking African American couple entered, and went through the sign-in rigamarole. When the thin white woman left, I followed her to the next building, where a man standing outside directed us inside. A man at the end of the hallway ushered us into the correct apartment.

This apartment, too, was small, and very homey compared to the gutted building next door. There was lots of light in this apartment, with honey wood floors and other wood furniture. There were many more African Americans in this apartment. The artwork

featured jazz musicians and other subjects in bright reds and oranges. I received a call on my cell phone and took it outside.

Instead of returning, I went to the next stop. There were three quilts in the hallway, and more in a bright room adjoining the hallway. Inside the brightly lit room, painted in a warm pale yellow, the quilts were breathtaking.

One African American woman was talking animatedly with an older white man, and black woman was there with a child, presumably her daughter. Two African American women sat talking at one end of the long room. I joined in the conversation between the older white man and the African American woman, who was pointing out her pieces and answering his questions. She said she was lazy, so she preferred working on small quilts. She pointed out one in the corner, mounted above the snack table, which she called "Me Time." About two square feet, it depicted a black woman painting her toenails. She explained that the original design was more complicated, but she had to take out elements like "a spliff." I laughed and said that really would be "me time." Her other quilt was a design called "apple core," which featured interlocking pieces shaped like apple cores, one of which looks something like this:



After sampling some of the snacks, which included crudités, crackers, and cheese, I read a magazine article on the group and their work, called the Harlem Gurls Knitting Club or something like that. They've had exhibitions around NYC, and it said that they all had an interest in dance as well as quilting. All the women were professionals.

In the hallway I sought the other piece by the pot-smoking hostess. I spoke with Anna Alvarez, one of the members of the Gurls, on her way back from the back room (which was mysteriously hidden by a dark piece of fabric hanging in the doorway). She explained that the group met once a month. She said they lost only two people (now have twelve). I replied that things happen, people move, and she replied that one woman moved to Atlanta. I tell her I know somebody who also recently moved, and she said it's the "new New York." She tells me that not everybody had sewing experience, although everybody but her danced. "I dance Spanish," she explained, apparently not the kind of dance the rest of the group did. The group of women have become friends as well as quilting buddies. In talking about the group, she explained that they had have several exhibitions and had been featured in the magazine I saw. She also explained that they hosted so-and-so (can't remember the name). She explained that the post office now has a quilt stamp, and the group that made that quilt visited New York from the South, and her group hosted then. She explained the process of quilting, first cutting and sewing the pieces together, then adding batting and quilting it together. She said that anyone could learn.

Anna ushered me back into the room, pointing out Ifa and her work (“Me Time,” piecing the apple core quilt and leaving someone else to quilt it). She then showed me her apple core quilt featured in the article (but not on the wall). She bragged a little, saying that it took Ifa and another woman 4 years to finish their quilt, whereas she took 3 months. She said something like when she sets her mind to something, she finishes it. She showed me other quilts in the magazine, telling me who made which, including one in which everyone in the group made together by contributing 4 squares, which she then quilted together. Again she took the opportunity to talk about how she really sets her mind to finishing things. She briefly described who made each quilt hanging in the room, saying that Ifa liked making small quilts and so-and-so liked making table runners, which were for sale. I sidestepped the implied question of whether I would buy one by remarking, “Oh, so you also sell some of your pieces.”

Looking around at the pamphlets and booklets neatly arranged on beautiful wood bookcases at the front of the room, I began talking with another member of the group. She talked about the group starting out as a dance group, or people mutually interested in dance, mostly people who took African dance classes at the Y. I asked about this, since somebody else had recommended them to me and I couldn’t find them. She asked me if I lived in Harlem, and I said, sort of, and when she heard where I lived, she said that was Harlem. She told me her daughter lived at 106<sup>th</sup> and Morningside, and I said that was a pretty area. She called over Anna and they started talking about the new sculptures installed at the park. Then they began talking about a statue of Harriet Tubman across the precinct at Frederick Douglass. They told me I needed to see it. The third woman sitting with us said that the roots on her dress scared her kids, she “needed to explain it.”

After I left that apartment I headed up to 130<sup>th</sup> street just west of Lenox, on a tree-lined street. First, I went the wrong way on Lenox, going east. On the way there a young man with an (Jamaican? West Indian?) accent, dreadlocks, and dark chocolate skin greeted me. When I realized my mistake I headed back across Lenox, and he propositioned me in a friendly way. “I think I’m in love,” he called after me. [I don’t think this is the first time I’ve had men flirt with me on the street, but it happened three times today, which probably simply reflects the amount of ground I covered and my more casual dress, a slim-cut V-neck t-shirt and jeans versus professional clothing.]

I had to get buzzed in at this apartment. As I walked up five flights of stairs, Christian music played from overhead speakers. I passed a door with a hand-lettered sign that said something about Jesus. As I climbed up past the fourth floor I met a white woman holding a plastic cup of water on her way down. She encouraged me, “Almost there.”

At the fifth floor a young man with a beard, dreadlocks, and dark chocolate skin called out, “Almost here?” He held the door open for me. Immediately across from the door was a large painting, or a series of paintings joined together in an abstract composition. The narrow hallway opened onto a bedroom, bathroom, and at the end, a living room and kitchen. I could not get a good sense of the size of the apartment. While it felt small, it was packed with paintings, so might have rivaled my apartment in Seth Low. A lot of the

abstract paintings looked the same to me just in different colors, with a small round figure of curlicues in the middle. This apartment was packed with people, probably at least 12. With two to three people in the “art room,” and several more in the living room, the place felt packed.

A dark-skinned woman with long braids asked me if she could get me some Perrier. I asked for regular water and followed her to the large kitchen (large for New York standards). A round kitchen table was laid with sparkling and mineral water, plastic cups, and paper cups. She found a gallon-sized plastic container of drinking water and asked if I wanted ice, then told me the water had been chilled. I grabbed a cup and she poured it for me. I thanked her, and drank. It was not cold.

A white man, the only white man in the apartment, asked about some drawings as he flipped through them. The artist, a young mocha-skinned woman with short hair, said they were graphite. I tried to listen in but the conversation ended there. I looked around the room, which included personal items such as DVDs, CDs, books, and potted plants. The furniture included an desk made of unpolished blond wood, set high, covered with pencils, drawing materials, and sketches; the kitchen table; nice wood bookcases and sofa; and beautiful pillows with layers of fabric as decoration. A white woman came into the living room, greeted the artist effusively.

Her bedroom also looked expensively furnished, with lots and lots of pillows and cushions set on top of a quilt in deep reds. The bedstead appeared to be solid wood, stained mahogany, with a (fence?) headboard. With this furniture she appeared relatively successful, or at independently wealthy. I went back to the art room to look at her price list, which ranged from a few hundred to \$6500 for paintings (drawings were not listed on the stapled price sheet). In this room several men were making jokes about not being able to afford her artwork.

In the hallway she was answering some questions from a chubby light-skinned man. I showed up when she explained that she started as a figurative painter, then took someone’s advice to “find my own voice.” This resulted in her abstract work. In the middle of this explanation a white woman came in, and the artist began her explanation again. Another black man joined us. This time she added that a lot of figurative painting, especially by African Americans, can be about how others see you. She no longer wanted to do this; she wanted to deal with what the media was saying, the things she read, etc.

After the other two people left I asked if some of the paintings grew out of a specific reaction to anything. She replied that they were “organic” and “deliberate.” She pointed to a green and blue painting, saying that it started out purple. Yet the colors and strokes were deliberate.

I went back to look at the price list in the art room, where two men were exchanging business cards. One man owned a skin-care products store on 125th, the other was some kind of development corporation. I left soon afterwards.

[I think that many of the young men in her apartment were her friends; the older ones were business, presumably well-to-do. The white people I saw so far also seemed affluent, if sometimes scruffy, but all of the white artists looked sleek and well-fed.]

Next on my list was an apartment on 135<sup>th</sup> that turned out to be in Lenox Terrace. I turned on the corner that had the Schomburg Center and Harlem Hospital, then walked past C-town nearly to Fifth Ave without seeing the art tour poster. I was the only non-white on the street. I realized that the address I sought was probably in Lenox Terrace. When I turned around people noticed. I ducked behind a bush to open up the map.

I found the correct building, which had a sweeping driveway curving up to the building. A thin, light-skinned man in a cap and uniform was sweeping leaves from the gutter into one of those dust-pan boxes that sets upright. I asked him where I could find 11P, the art show, and he walked up the curb to set the broom and dustpan down, and to let me into the building. The foyer was all polished granite or some other impressively shiny, solid-looking material.

I signed in on a sheet in a black binder with my name, time of arrival, and destination, at a counter that nearly reached my chest. The doorman called up to 11P and then gestured me inside, calling me “sweetheart” or some sort of endearment. I got into the elevator and rode up to the 11<sup>th</sup> floor.

When I stepped out I was in shock. Perhaps this was not the building or floor that Congressman Rangel lived in, for it was dark and dingy looking. Or at least on first glance. The dark green linoleum was probably clean, but looked awful with the dim fluorescent lighting, which also made the white walls look dirty gray. The rust-colored doors looked flimsy, with ancient-looking doorbells. I peered at the doors, which had no easily visible letters identifying the apartments, when a door opened at the very end of the hall. A middle-aged, plump, light-skinned woman greeted me, and I walked down the hallway to reach her.

She introduced herself and invited me into a bright apartment with large windows. The apartment was much better than the hallway indicated, but still did not appear to be a luxury apartment. There was no molding or trim on the walls, the ceilings were relatively low, and the lines were all dully straight. The long living room opened in an L-shape to the dining room and kitchen, with the bathroom immediately to the right and presumably also the doorway to the bedroom.

I was the only person in the apartment. She told me that the artist was in the bathroom, but I could take a look around. The living room had paintings mounted on the walls and set against a piece of furniture on the floor. On one side of the room, a table held jewelry, which was hers. She offered me a drink and I said that I had just had a drink at the place where I came from. I asked if they had had a lot of people, and she said yes.

The painter came out and offered me a drink as well. I repeated myself, and she invited me to take a look around and see if there was anything I liked. She handed me a piece of paper listing the names of each piece and its price, ranging from \$90-100. They chatted me up a bit, asking where I lived. They sat at the dining table, a rectangular table seating at least six, with a white tablecloth, wine, cheese and crackers, and a centerpiece on top. The painter was also plump, but dark-skinned, with straightened hair.

The names were quite clever, such as “View of Pandemonium,” although the paintings looked juvenile to me (not that I know anything about art). The jewelry, mostly necklaces, was a mishmash of different colors and styles, mixing stones with shells in what looked to me like a mess. One painting caught my eye, with two figures in two rectangles side-by-side with two red lines arching across them. I lingered at this painting, then reported that I liked it. The artist looked at me expectantly, and I realized that I was then supposed to buy it.

As I made noises to head out they asked me to sign their book, which I did using the TC email address. Someone also handed me a book of coupons to use in Harlem. They told me they also did shows in December and some other time, and I asked if they worked together. They do.

I skipped locations at an art gallery and a library to look for a place on 137<sup>th</sup> street. I started on the south side of the street, where I ran into two more groups of men. I nodded at each, once again earning intense stares and propositions to go out. [It bothered me by now.] I passed by the building, then doubled back and crossed the street to find the building set back from the street. A woman was talking on her cell phone outside, presumably to her daughter, since she kept saying “Mami.” Since she held the HOAST map in her hands I followed her to the elevator, which she discovered was out of order. I told her I was going to the same place as her. She hung up with her daughter and said to me resignedly that we needed to climb the stairs. I followed her up four flights. This building must have been beautiful once but looked dingy and in need of repair. Upstairs the hallway was also dark, ill lit by fluorescent bulbs, with flimsy doors. My companion decided that the second door was the correct one, since on the second floor this door was J. She knocked and there was no answer. She walked down the hallway, and said, “This is H, so this must be J.” After a second knock earned no response, she told me this happened to her already. We headed downstairs. She asked if I wanted to go with her to the next place, and I said yes.

There we ran into a middle-aged woman and a younger woman, both light-skinned, who could have been her daughter. They were also holding HOAST maps. My companion asked if they were looking for the artist’s studio and that they weren’t home. The young woman gloated that she had said that if the elevator was broken they wouldn’t go in. My companion announced that yesterday, there was one place that was on the seventh floor. “Seventh floor?” squealed the women appropriately. My companion continued that she did that “four or five times” yesterday, wearing out a young man although she is “overweight.” The plump older woman made an appreciative noise and told her she got

her exercise” for the *week*.” My companion asked my name. The older woman introduced herself as Sandra and the younger woman as Kim. I think my companion was Vanessa. We walked out of the front area together and down the street, passing a bunch of young women.

The two older women asked each other about showed they had seen. Vanessa asked Sandra about a jewelry show, “Was there anything, spectacular there?” The reply was no, that she knew this artist, and this artist usually had a lot more. I said, maybe she sold a lot. Sandra replied that she hoped so.

The three other women planned to go to the apartment on 130<sup>th</sup>, which was Lenox Terrace, so I told them I had just come from there. As we walked Vanessa looked on her map for me to find #14, which was on 141<sup>st</sup>. At the corner of 137<sup>th</sup> and Lenox we parted, saying we might see each other at 141<sup>st</sup>.

[By then I was already tired and ready to go home but excited at the prospect of meeting these women later. I did not think about the fact that they would need to backtrack for a total of 18 blocks to rejoin me.]

I didn’t remember the address for the building, only that it was a hyphenated address, so I stopped in the first building on 141<sup>st</sup> with such an address. A young man was leaving the building and looked at me curiously. Again, I was quite conscious of being the only non-black (and perhaps non-familiar) person on the block. This block also had lots of street life, mostly young men but also young women and a few old-timers.

I walked up the steps into a sort of outdoor foyer. Opening the door and holding it open with his food, a young light-skinned man with dreadlocks under a hat and light blue uniform leaned out and asked if he could help me. I asked if the art show was there. He said no, looking genuinely confused. He told me I should go to 30<sup>th</sup> street (or somewhere else, I’m not sure I heard him correctly although I suppose Chelsea is known for art). I said no, I was on the right street, maybe I had the wrong building. I told him I’d just take a second to look at the map. I pulled out the map. “What does it say,” he asked. I told him 141st and Lenox. He confirmed that we were at 141<sup>st</sup> and Lenox, but I couldn’t possibly be in the right place. I told him again that I probably had the wrong building. I found the address and read it to him. He looked confused and said the buildings across the street were 100. I told him I would find it.

I knew I was on the right track when I saw a middle-aged man and young girl carrying two paintings to a luxury SUV. (With a quick glance I thought it was a Lexus, but it might have been something else.)

Again, the building was set back from the street. A dark-skinned man on the sidewalk asked if I was looking for the art show. When I said yes he gestured towards the correct door, which was set back from the street. Again, it was another dingy building that was once beautiful. Paintings and prints were set up around the marble foyer. They didn’t look particularly impressive. A young dark-skinned man sitting behind a table



straightened up to invite me to look around. I assumed, wrongly, that this was the artist. Four young girls assiduously scribed notebook paper on the other side of the foyer, which included more paintings and a small table set up with t-shirts painted by the artist. The young man told me there was more artwork upstairs. "By the same artist?" I asked. He said the gallery was both downstairs and upstairs, third floor.

On my way up the dark stairs three people were coming down, a slim young woman and two young men, One of the young turned out to be the artist, and he showed me back upstairs to a dark hallway. He opened his door with a key and told me he'd be back.

His canvases were huge, with riotous color. I was perhaps more fascinated with the apartment, which was also a one-bedroom with full kitchen. The apartment was dark, dingy, matching the hallway and foyer. In the kitchen an old stove sat behind a new counter, the fake-granite stuff, with a double sink. A painting was propped against a grime-encrusted fridge. It was a good-sized kitchen, twice as large as mine. The living room, the best-lit room, had a futon, a tiny painted end table in the middle of the room with a painted vase sitting on top, and paintings leaning against or mounted on every wall. The bedroom had a mattress covered by a faded black sheet sitting on a boxspring and bedframe, with no headboard.

The artist came back in as I gazed at a painting in his bedroom. He was light-skinned, possibly Puerto Rican, with dark hair and eyes, medium build, short. He asked if I had a chance to see all the rooms, and I said no. He took me into the living room and described an abstract painting as "The Paper Chase": the ghetto, a hand chasing after the green, a white man holding down an Indian (Native American) man. I made impressed noises and asked about two figures set in a curve on the right side of the painting. He said that was a "no" sign, signifying the division of black people from everyone else.

I told him I didn't know much about art and didn't know what to ask. He said that was ok, when he first started learning he didn't know anything about abstract art and just painted.

He took me into the kitchen, where he said some of his favorite pieces were: the curvy ones that looked like intestines were inspired by "graffitti." We talked a little about his start as a graffiti artist and the crackdown that happened, with the "Vandal Squad" staking out shows to arrest artists. I asked him about a framed newspaper article with a \$20, and he said that was his first press, and he sold his first painting for \$1400.

He told me he had to go back downstairs, that the four girls were waiting to interview him. I told him I wouldn't keep him, but lingered, so he told me I could stay, just to close the door behind me. The young man downstairs came up shortly after, as I stood in the bedroom looking at the painting of a head with some sort of screen painted onto it. He said that was one of his favorites. He also pointed out another painting in the kitchen, one of the curly ones but on a dark red background and additional figures (not just an intestine), which he said reminded him of "music." Also one in the hallway, "Black

Painters,” three squiggled figures of black mixed with blue, pink, and yellow. I asked him if they were friends, and he said yes, something like he supports him.

I headed back downstairs. The friend was going to leave the door unlocked and I told him that the painter told me to close it behind me. “He has his keys,” he agreed, and pulled it shut. I asked him if a lot of people had come to visit, and he said less than last year, he didn’t know why.

When we headed down the friend did another hard sell for prints of the Black Painters and others from upstairs. Compared to the vibrancy of the canvases upstairs, the prints looked especially boring. I started flipping through his binders of artwork, listening to the answers he gave the young girls: “between, a hundred dollars and a couple of thousand.” “Depending on how long it takes me, how much I put into it.” “A few days. sometimes a few weeks.” After the interview the girls said goodbye quickly and ran out the door, prompting him to joke that they couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

I wasn’t buying, so he decided to show me his photographs, saying that people also bought those. I asked if most people came to this show to buy, or to look, and he said both. “You came here to look, huh?”

The photos were quite lovely, capturing the light and angles to show scenes and people both hopeful and bleak. He said something about two semesters at Hunter College. I don’t know if this was to impress me, but when I said, so you just started, he said, my professors and class were blown away. As I flipped through pictures of street scenes of people doing one another’s hair, mugging for the camera, and sitting, he explained that people in the neighborhood supported his art and wanted to pose for him. I asked him if he grew up in the area, and he said no, Lower East Side, but he’s been in the neighborhood for ten years. I missed the opportunity to ask him how the neighborhood’s changed, tired by this point at the hard sell. There were several pictures of an old woman without teeth, whom he called Mama Buck or something like that, and he said that the painting upstairs was also of her.

It was starting to get dark by the time I left. I took the 7 bus down to 125<sup>th</sup>. Around 127<sup>th</sup> street, a slim, well-dressed young white couple disentangled themselves from a small crowd of African-looking pre-teens, and got on the bus. The boys waved after them. I was back where white people were safe to roam. Several other groups of white people were walking down 125<sup>th</sup> as I headed home.