

# Uptown Art Migration: Harlem's Growing Art Scene

Harlem's new galleries are growing a contemporary-art scene in an already rich cultural neighborhood



The Sapphire Dance Line and the Marching Cobras of New York Dancers perform on West 125th Street in Harlem, where several art galleries are opening their doors. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By  
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Ask art dealer Elizabeth Dee about the growing contemporary-art scene in her Harlem neighborhood, and she offers a surprising explanation: Above 125th Street, there are almost no tall buildings.

“When you look up,” she said, “all you see is sky.”

Ms. Dee, who is relocating her namesake art gallery later this month after years downtown, has solid business reasons for the move. But that sense of a new and open landscape, she said, was one of the most compelling.



Miranda Lichtenstein's 'Grounds 6' (2016) will be exhibited in the new Elizabeth Dee gallery on Fifth Avenue near 125th Street. *PHOTO:ETIENNE FROSSARD/MIRANDA LICHTENSTEIN/ELIZABETH DEE, NEW YORK*

Ms. Dee is the latest to open a sizable space in a neighborhood that, as recently as a few years ago, wouldn't have been thought of as a likely location for an art-gallery district. When her Fifth Avenue space opens on Sept. 24th, it will bring the number of recent uptown transplants or new arts spaces in Harlem to just under a dozen.

Last May, another influential U.S. gallery, Gavin Brown's Enterprise, opened a huge new space in an old 127th Street Harlem brewery. Among the others clustered loosely around 125th Street: Eli Ping Frances Perkins, Broadway 1602, Tel Aviv gallery Tempo Rubato and Switzerland's Freymond-Guth.

The moves, which some critics see as unwelcome signs of ongoing gentrification, come as another major neighborhood expansion is under way. This fall, Columbia University begins to unveil its 17-acre Manhattanville campus, which runs from 125th Street and Broadway to the Hudson River and up to 133rd Street.

For some galleries, the migration was prompted, at least in part, by superstorm Sandy. In the fall of 2012, many art businesses concentrated in the city's West Chelsea neighborhood had their basements flooded by the historic storm, damaging or ruining valuable inventory. Many were inspired to start nosing around elsewhere.



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And just as flood-insurance costs were climbing, the High Line park and the relocation of the Whitney Museum of American Art boosted already-rising area rents.

At about \$45 to \$75 dollars a square foot, according to real-estate brokers, Harlem gallery space is roughly a third the cost of a ground-floor gallery on a prime Chelsea block.

Historically a nomadic industry, New York's art world has relocated every few decades.

The 57th Street corridor was its midcentury headquarters. In the '80s came the rise of SoHo, and by the early aughts, West Chelsea. The Lower East Side and the Upper East Side have started luring some away in recent years.

Once a New York art neighborhood takes off, said Elliott Arkin, a sculptor whose work is in the Louvre Museum, among other public and private collections, commercialization usually follows and art becomes less experimental.

“Harlem is attracting the gallerists who want to break out of this stagnation,” he said.



Martha Moldovan and Harry Schleiff turned a spare bedroom in their Harlem apartment into an art space dubbed the Rear Window Gallery. *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Gallery owners and art collectors say Harlem’s art scene is also growing because people are shopping for contemporary art differently.

The old-fashioned Saturday collectors’ crawl from gallery to gallery isn’t done anymore, said musician and print collector Bill Campbell: “People go to art fairs.”

Now, he said, a gallery needs to offer “a special reason to go out, a destination art show or two—more of an experience.”

In her two-floor space, former home to the Studio Museum in Harlem, Ms. Dee will show two to three exhibitions at a time.

Harry Schlieff, co-owner of buzzed-about artist-project space Rear Window on 118th Street, said most visitors usually come to see its shows during the opening-night parties. There isn't a lot of drop-in traffic—at least, not at this point.

But some in Harlem's gallery group are already scheduling their openings together, hoping to create a critical mass.

Not everyone is happy about the trend—and the broader neighborhood changes it reflects.

In 2014, director [Spike Lee](#), lecturing at Pratt Institute, famously railed against the gentrification of Harlem, among other historically African-American neighborhoods, decrying what he dubbed the “Christopher Columbus Syndrome.”

He said, “You can't discover this! We been here.”

The historically influential Essie Green Galleries, for example, opened in Harlem's Sugar Hill neighborhood in 1989, representing renowned African-American artists such as Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis. It is just one of a long list of cultural institutions and arts-focused community-development initiatives already in the area.

The two largest and best-known émigrés to the neighborhood—Ms. Dee's and Mr. Brown's galleries—are helmed by Harlem residents. Ms. Dee, who moved near [Mount Morris Park](#) years ago, said she has been welcomed and feels a sense of community—and predicts that more in the art-gallery community will follow.

Creating a gallery district in Harlem is “a good idea,” said sculptor Mr. Arkin, who also works as a Brooklyn real-estate broker on the side.

“It took Brooklyn forever to develop” into a destination neighborhood for visitors, he said, “but Harlem is already a name. You could imagine people saying, ‘Let's go to Harlem’” to look at art.

Even the region's biggest fans, however, don't see the industry as a whole relocating—or the peripatetic art world making much of a dent in the DNA of its new home.

“There's a long cultural history here, you won't have the same situation where the galleries come and take over and gentrify everything into an art zone,” said Mr. Schlieff.

Harlem, he added, “is authentic.”