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On the Town - Philadelph...



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On the Town - Philadelphia

While many historic sites (Liberty Bell, Independence Hall) live on here, America's first capital has changed a lot since 1774. Discover the thriving underground art scene, hear the sounds of Philly Soul, shop for locally made souvenirs and more.

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MAKE

Underground Artist Society

Philly's creative minds are working collectively to open unconventional galleries in warehouses, consignment shops and even private homes.

BY ELISA LUDWIG



On a recent Philadelphia First Friday - when the city's galleries are open from 5pm to 9pm the first Friday of each month - a revamped warehouse in the neighborhood of Fishtown opened its doors for a group-curated show called "Prospects." The eight artists, known as Little Berlin, collaboratively assembled an indoor badminton court (art-goers were invited to take a turn); an astro turf lawn installation replete with a sprinkler; and a pyramid of hand-painted eggs (with a nearby table of condiments to encourage snacking).

Meanwhile, across town in the Loft District, the newly minted Tiger Strikes Asteroid welcomed visitors to its inaugural opening, "Getting Ready for the Prom," showcasing pared-down, cartoon-inspired works of the collective's UPenn MFA grads, like Tim Gierschick's wooden cabinet panel painted with latex "pods" and Alexis Granwell's sculptural assemblages of paper, latex and

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These collaborative shows organized by artists are what set Philadelphia apart from many of its big-city counterparts, where most artists strive for solo shows in perfect, pristine galleries. The artist-run scene may have something to do with the fact that the city is rich in fine-art graduates with energy and inspiration to spare.

Couple that with the inexpensive cost of living and a strong DIY aesthetic - plus the growing support of grant-making institutions and a friendly artist community - and it's not surprising that the city has become a breeding ground for artistic experimentation. "It's about getting donated labor, finding materials, sharing the costs," says Roberta Fallon, who, with fellow artist Libby Rosof, runs Theartblog.org, a site chronicling the local art scene.

What Fallon and others have long recognized is that the art scene is lively, fun and anything but pretentious. The older artist-run spaces - Nexus Foundation for Today's Art (est. 1975), Vox Populi (est. 1988) and Space 1026 (est. 1997) - remain among the best places to see young talent, and many of their graduating members have gone on to show at museums and galleries worldwide. They've also set a standard for the younger generation, demonstrating that artists need not wait for a gallery owner to pluck them out of obscurity.

"The great thing about Philadelphia's art scene is that it's really process-driven and not market-driven," says Matt Suib, an artist and former member of Vox Populi who now runs the Screening gallery, which is devoted to video and film works.

University of the Arts graduate, sculptor and Little Berlin member Alex Gartelmann devotes his spare time to running a gallery out of his South Philly home. He typically hosts shows - built on themes like "information overload" and "emotional memory" - every other month; you can also visit by appointment. "I started the gallery as a way to create opportunities for my peers and create bridges between artists so we can work together and make the art accessible to an audience," he says.

Meanwhile, Space 1026er Aryon Hoselton has opened a North Philly warehouse called Nerd Island - bought for \$1 in an auction - which hosts exhibitions and live music. Another North Philly space, PIFAS (Philadelphia Institute for Advanced Study), acts as an arts incubator of sorts. A kitschy website features video of faux experiments, but the real institution houses a gallery, hosts resident artists, and holds an offbeat series of symposia and film nights. Kensington's Flux Space is a Tyler School of Art-grad-run facility with studios and community programming, showing wide-ranging works by contemporary artists.

Other spaces include Basekamp, a Center City gallery that focuses on large-scale collaborative projects; Fishtown's Bambi Gallery and artist consignment shop; Paddock Gallery, a South Philly home-turned-gallery; and Copy Gallery, a newer configuration of a former collective called Black Floor. The art at these venues runs the gamut, but if there's a defining aesthetic, it's one that's anti-slick and often playful, informed by street art, pop culture and found objects.

Amid this wealth of scrappy spaces, one sobering reality is that not all will live long enough to take root. Some might not even make it to the next First Friday. But if the city's perfect art-making conditions persist, new operations will continue to emerge, says Nadia Hironaka, art educator and former member of Vox Populi. "I meet a lot of students," she says, "and when they graduate from art school, the first thing they set out to do is open a gallery."

GRAFFITI FIT FOR A GALLERY

Street art is being welcomed indoors.

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photographs street scenes for the magazine Megawords, a collaboration with Anthony Smyrski. (The pair also operates a storefront called Juanita and Juan's, which is a curated bookstore, gallery and performance space.)

Murphy, a onetime wall writer, is less interested in curating fine-art versions of graffiti than documenting the real thing. He notes that the Philly style, characterized by tall and skinny, almost elegant lettering, is alive and well. "The best work is on train lines and boxtrucks, writers like 4Ever," he says.

But street art is also finding a home in codified art spaces. At the recently opened T&P Fine Art (www.tandpfineart.com) in the Italian Market, curated shows exhibit urban and graphically inspired artists like Shepard Fairey, Aiko and Smear. This month, local street artists Nose and El Toro will be showing their works in "Advertisements for Myself" (opening June 5).

Nose, who has made a name for himself in stickers, wheat-paste posters and street installations chained to fences around Philadelphia, sees street art as a vital part of the local landscape. "I'd rather see what I do [outside], but it's still nice to see it in a gallery," he says.

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