

Artist converts her Mott Haven home into art gallery

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Carmen Rios-Nuñez

Marco Saavedra leads an artist talk and workshop in his first solo show in an apartment “gallery” in Mott Haven.

Irises in shades of blue and purple were inspired by the community gardens of the Bronx. Two basketball players painted over an image of the Wanaqua community garden in Mott Haven served as a metaphor for the artist’s life, with the layers of life painted on top of each other.

Marco Saavedra, 27, first started painting the Bronx when he moved here permanently three years ago. And last month, he exhibited his art, which he said reflects all that has “produced” him – from the gardens of the borough to the poet Maya Angelou to the painter Jean Michel Basquiat — in his first solo show in an apartment “gallery” in Mott Haven, hosted by Alexander Avenue Apartment 3A (AAA3A), owned by visual artist Blanka Amezkua. Saavedra is also an activist and a member of the Dream 9, a group of nine undocumented activists who were brought to the U.S. without papers as children, as well as the author of an upcoming book, “Eclipse of Dreams: The Undocumented-led Struggle for Freedom.”

“Anything that I paint, when I can paint, is going to be political because I feel as undocumented people, we’re reduced to workers, or exploited people, or perfect American dreamers,” said Saavedra.

Earlier this month, about 35 people of all ages gathered together in Amezkua’s living room for an artist talk and workshop led by Saavedra titled “I rise.” Amezkua invites artists into her home to exhibit their work for a month and host a workshop and cook a meal for guests.

“I feel committed to supporting the space,” said René Valdez, 46, a West Harlem resident and organizer at Release

Aging People from Prison who attended the workshop. “It brings people to the space that you don’t normally see at a gallery.”

Amezkuia said her project began in 2008 after she was awarded the Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) award. The BRIO, a \$3,000 grant awarded by the [Bronx Council on the Arts](#), goes to 25 Bronx artists each year to create literary, media, visual and performance works. It was the first time Amezkuia had ever received an award and it encouraged her to create what started as the Bronx Blue Bedroom Project before it became known as AAA3A.

“The workshops work as an extension of the artist,” Amezkuia said. “Some of the artists have never had the opportunity to actually teach about their work or share their work with a larger audience. The idea is to provide a platform for local artists.”

One of the perks of running the shows in her apartment, Amezkuia said, is that they require a tiny budget. She usually splits any expenses with the artist.

Saavedra’s art, which was painted on various materials including stretched burlap on cardboard, contact paper and wrapping paper, covered the narrow living room’s walls. Nature, basketball and artistic icons were some of the subjects of the paintings, all of which were completed over the last three years since Saavedra moved permanently to the Bronx.

“It brings awareness along a major platform that people not only pay attention to, but people care about,” said Tony Holmes, Marketing and Communications Program Manager at The Bronx Council on the Arts. “Art is the one thing that communicates in every language and every culture and so it serves as a basis of a common denominator.”

Amezkuia became familiar with Saavedra’s work when she visited La Morada, a restaurant in Mott Haven owned by Saavedra’s parents, and saw his art covering its walls. She fell in love with a painting Saavedra made depicting Basquiat, one of Saavedra’s idols. Amezkuia ended up purchasing the painting and it now hangs in her kitchen.

At the exhibit, noisy chatter broke out around the four wooden picnic tables arranged end to end in the living room. A coffee table was topped with dishes catered by La Morada and the guests filled paper plates with flautas, nachos, guacamole and crema con fresas before sitting down to listen to Saavedra discuss his work. Among some of his influences were Nina Simone, Vincent van Gogh and James Arthur Baldwin.

“Marco’s work is phenomenal,” said Maricella Z. Infante, 45, a chief operations officer at Phoenix Translations who said she’s been attending Amezkuia’s gallery shows ever since she met her at an all-Mexican party about four years ago. “Marco being an immigrant and with today’s president, it’s important to support artists like him and what immigrants contribute.”

Saavedra immigrated here with his father, sister and aunt when he was 3 years old. His parents, who had planned to move the family to Mexico City after they had saved enough money, had already been living in New York City for a year before they decided that the opportunities for work and school were better in New York. Saavedra grew up in Washington Heights without papers, and is currently applying for asylum in the U.S.

In 2013, he was detained by border patrol for going to Mexico to pick up five dreamers who had self-deported or had been deported during the Obama Administration, in an effort to help them seek asylum and advocate for immigrants who had recently arrived to the U.S. and immigrants who had been deported. Saavedra is awaiting his final court date this coming June.

Amezkuia’s shows usually last about a month, and her home gallery is booked for the year. Her next project, a photography exhibit featuring works by Vidal Centeno, titled “Taking It Day By Day,” will run until the end of March.

For now, Saavedra said that he will continue to work at his parent’s restaurant and on his art.

“I think the art show, since it was the first show I’ve ever done, really inspired me to put more work together and try to

do more in a disciplined manner,” he said.

Saavedra’s parents beamed with pride as they sat among their son’s guests and listened to him give his talk.

“We feel very proud of our son,” said Antonio Saavedra in Spanish. “This was our goal when we came to this country 30 years ago and it was worth it.”