At Home with the Works

In New York City, real estate plays double duty, and apartments turn into art galleries.

LOUIS BURY

When I visited AAA3A in December 2023, a gallery that artist Blanka Amezkua has run out of her South Bronx apartment for almost a decade, several makeshift plinths not only looked stylish but also suited the quirky artworks they displayed. A wooden bench had been inverted on the floor, its legs pointing up, with an identical bench balanced atop it, legs down, as though the pieces of furniture were performing a two-person yoga pose. Colorful sculptures by artist Cesar Viveros were displayed on the benches, including a coffee mug with protruding eyeballs and birds' beaks (Pajarito from 2022), as well as a half-purple, half-white dog—Firulais (2019)—whose skeletal body echoed the benches' spindly forms. Nearby, atop a sturdier wooden dining table, stood Toro (2023), a towering papier-mâché bull festooned with neon lights that evoked exploding fireworks.

These curatorial decisions were happy accidents. To install Viveros's fall 2023 exhibition, *My intimate relationship with paper*, Amezkua decided to improvise plinths from her furniture. She happens to own a number of benches and tables, in an otherwise modestly sized apartment, because for each exhibition she asks the artist to cook a dinner, or lead a workshop, for fifteen to twenty people. The gallery's tradition of hosting community events traces back to Amezkua's native Mexico City, as well as her upbringing in Los Angeles, where her family held large social gatherings. "Growing up, there were always people around the house. I missed that togetherness when I moved to New York twenty years ago and have been trying to re-create it wherever I go," says Amezkua, who has also lived in Athens, Greece.

A similar spirit of openness, as well as of necessary invention, animates other contemporary New York City home art galleries. New York has a rich history of artist-run spaces, but in the past decade, and especially in the years since Covid, home galleries here seem to be experiencing a renaissance. Perhaps social isolation left people not only longing for physical community but also accustomed to the idea of working from home. Another factor, certainly, is the lack of affordable, centrally located real estate compared with previous generations. Whatever motivates artists and arts professionals to operate home galleries, everybody who does so must be comfortable dedicating part of their domestic life to the venture. The artworks take up precious floor and wall space. Friends, acquaintances, and strangers request visits even when the gallerists (and their roommates, if they have any) might prefer time alone. Needless to say, running a home gallery is difficult and inconvenient, so much so that you're unlikely to do it unless you consider the undertaking urgent and enjoyable.

The urgency is often, though not exclusively, financial. A commercial storefront in a prime New York City gallery neighborhood like Tribeca can easily rent for $25,000 or more per month; eliminating that overhead changes the equation of who can afford to operate a gallery and why. Take, for instance, April, who requested that her last name not be included in this article and who for several years has run Tutu Gallery from her Bed-Stuy apartment. Her goals for the gallery have been to build a community for international women artists—April is a Chinese emigrant herself—living in New York and to achieve commercial success. But she hasn't allowed the gallery to incur more financial risk than absolutely necessary.

Limiting risk allows April to program the gallery with idealism. She gravitates toward artwork that, like immigrants themselves, exists in between categories, and she encourages her artists to respond to the apartment environment, resulting in exhibitions that she characterizes as "slightly off the wall," literally and figuratively. In *Land Language/Bahasa Bumi*, for instance, a fall 2023 show that featured artists Megan Nugroho and Samuel Alexander Forest, the latter's sculptural landscape drawings were situated in clever relation to the living room decor, with conical volcano sculptures (*Krakatau*, 2023) displayed on circular coffee tables and craggy iceberg sculptures (*Jayawijaya*, 2023) displayed on the mantelpiece.

This willingness to try things out extends to the gallery's business practices. April describes Tutu's commercial approach as a "hybrid" of elements from the for-profit art industry and not-for-profit DIY music scenes. While most of its artworks sell at higher price points, the gallery also offers smaller, more merch-like pieces at lower price points and has even experimented with forms of barter. Its potlatch-esque 2022 Christmas exhibition, *Very Naughty Super Trashy*, for example, included several hundred artworks by more than fifty artists; each visitor to the show was permitted to take one work for free.

The varieties of exchange that occur at Tutu Gallery exemplify how some home galleries aspire to commercial growth; others operate on anticapitalist principles; and most find a balance between profit- and pleasure-seeking. Until recently, for example, Putty's Coronation gallery took zero cut of any sales. Artist David Temchulla founded the gallery in 2016 with the goals of building community and, according to its website, "offer[ing] artists the opportunity to experiment and contextualize their work without capitalist pressures." In Putty's earliest years, Temchulla supplemented his operating costs by renting out a bedroom in his Lower East Side apartment on Airbnb. Today, artist Benjamin Koditschek co-operates the gallery with Temchulla out of the former's South Slope apartment.

Ed Woodham specified that he does not take any cut of sales at SHOWROOM gallery, which he has run for the past year out of his Murray Hill studio apartment. As the founder of Art in Odd Places, which since 1996 has organized charming art actions in public spaces, Woodham might seem an unlikely candidate to start a more private style of gallery. Yet the underlying motivations are quite similar. "Like my other curatorial and artistic work," he elaborates, "SHOWROOM is a conceptual gesture, an example to others of how to design the world you want with what you happen to have around you." His explanation, more ars poetica than mission statement, not only encapsulates the resourceful pluck found in most home galleries, but also encapsulates the kind of work his gallery exhibits. Its winter 2023–24 exhibition, *Reverse - Order* featured lively watercolor portraits by artist Juan Hernandez, who in the decades since his incarceration at age sixteen has developed an art practice, with a rehabilitative bent, under conditions of severe constraint.

While most home gallerists do take a cut of sales, they're less likely than other gallerists to pursue business growth as an end unto itself. Curator Daisy Sanchez—who used to run Daisy's Room out of her former council flat in London and plans to open a new home gallery when she moves back to that city later this year—expressed reservations about "the myth of infinite growth," preferring instead to keep operations manageable in scope and to "let young artists go rather than try to grow an apartment gallery with them." Connie Lee—who runs Art Lives Here, a nonprofit that facilitates public art installations in underserved communities, as well as a home gallery in Harlem by the same name—also prefers for artists to "come through" one of her programs and then "move on."

This reluctance to scale up is not only philosophical but also logistical. By their very nature, home art galleries are less public-facing than galleries with commercial leases. Often, their addresses aren't available on their websites, and potential visitors must reach out over email or social media to obtain them. Many home gallerists hold other jobs and have no staff. "There's a nice, natural limit to the activity," muses Poppy Pulitzer, who used to work in the commercial gallery sector and together with artist Cal Siegel co-operates Astor Weeks, located in one of Harlem's gorgeous Astor Row town houses. "It's been surprising to see how each artist responds to the architecture," she says.

The limits on home gallerists' space and time can lead to clarity of purpose. Underland Gallery, for example, is located in Bay Ridge, a South Brooklyn neighborhood far from New York City's more central artistic hubs. Its cofounding artists—Hannah Salyer, Ester Kwon, and Maxim Elrod—have therefore focused on serving the needs of hyperlocal arts communities. The result is an eclectic program of art exhibitions, literary readings, film screenings, and live music. Their *DEATH MASQUERADE* 2023 was a Halloween potluck-style installation of death masks, and at their fall 2023 *PRIX FIXE* exhibition visitors were seated around a table and served artworks for their viewing consideration. The ground-floor space that houses these events features sumptuous wooden moldings and bold, flora-and-fauna patterned wallpapering—the most attention-grabbing interior design I encountered in my research for this article.

The idiosyncrasies of home art galleries make visits to them feel more intimate than jaunts to traditional white-cube spaces. The experience is not only about seeing art but also about spending time in

someone's home. Gallerists tend to offer coffee or tea, sometimes even a snack, as well as a seat in the living room or around a table. Longer, deeper conversation is practically unavoidable. "Given the smaller scale of operations, visitors get more attention, which they appreciate," reflects Bill Cournoyer, who since 2016 has run The Meeting, an art advisory firm and private exhibition space, in his West Village apartment. The intimate setting makes it easier for people to imagine how the artworks might look in their homes, and harder to pretend that art exists abstracted from life's material conditions.

Yet informality can also undermine a business's credibility, at least in some people's eyes. "There's a comfort to home galleries," says artist and writer Lucas Regazzi, who together with his partner, the curator Patrick Bova, runs april april, a Bed-Stuy gallery that shows artists who live outside New York City and commissions poetry to accompany each show, "but there's also a class-related stigma against them." The persistence of this stigma—the notion that home galleries aren't as serious as other types of exhibition spaces—points up the survivorship bias inherent in romanticized views of scrappy, artist-run spaces.

When underdog New York City arts venues, from A.I.R. Gallery to El Museo del Barrio, exert an outsized influence, their origin stories become part of art historical lore. But that type of success is not the fate of most alternative art venues, nor is it necessarily their founders' ambition. To paraphrase Woodham, most such places are doing what they can with what they have, working to create cultural space for a community or an aesthetic that doesn't currently have enough of it. All-or-nothing assumptions about cultural relevance—the idea that if something isn't well-known it must not be important—not only minimize the contributions of home galleries but also obscure the economic conditions, by naturalizing them, under which those galleries seek to carve out an alternative.

In the era of social media, such assumptions are prevalent and easy to make. You can search for a gallery, artist, or curator and get a ballpark sense of their influence based on their follower counts and a few other search results. (You will also get a sense of how modest art world influence looks relative to mainstream influence.) In such circumstances, and especially in these early postpandemic years, home galleries' intimate, IRL pleasures feel like a throwback to the pre-internet era of socialization, where personal and professional networks expanded more slowly, artistic communities were more centralized, and word-of-mouth cultural knowledge wasn't a dead metaphor.

Yet even as home galleries might feel like a form of resistance against the internet's flattening of culture, they benefit from the ease with which information is disseminated online. Unsurprisingly, multiple home gallerists told me that their or their gallery's online presence facilitates most of its new face-to-face connections. This was especially the case for Sanchez, who, in her midtwenties, has already received notable recognition from the art press, such as a 2022 ARTnews profile. As a matter of fact, she first developed a substantial online following as a teenager, when she posted about art on Tumblr.

In 2020s New York City, then, home art galleries represent less a return to the physicality of underground spaces than a reassertion of that sensibility's pleasures. It's a sensibility that manages to be a bit more private than is typical nowadays, without regressing into in-group exclusivity. It also offers a way of doing business that doesn't measure its worth solely in market terms, resulting in a less hurried and less status-oriented experience than so much else that visitors encounter in the art world and beyond. Home art galleries existed long before the internet, but their persistence affirms the need for small, heterogeneous cultural initiatives that work to create the world they want with what's at hand.●

LOUIS BURY remains reluctant to scale up for both philosophical and logistical reasons. His most recent book is The Way Things Go (punctum books, 2023).