

LOCAL HEROES

The Brooklyn Museum surveys recent art from the borough.

By Peter Schjeldahl



The artist Shaun Leonardo stages dance-hall events that toy with tradition: women pay men for a spin around the floor.

Courtesy Whitney Browne

At some point in the past several years, maybe late one night—dogs whimpering in their sleep, cats snapping alert—the tectonic plates of youthful creativity in New York City shifted, and Manhattan became a suburb of Brooklyn. A show at the Brooklyn Museum of works by thirty-five local artists and collectives, “Crossing Brooklyn: Art from Bushwick, Bed-Stuy, and Beyond,” expatiates on a situation already patent in the borough’s galleries and hangouts, notably those in Bushwick—a funky Montparnasse four L-train stops past the tamed Montmartre of Williamsburg. If you are young and a New York artist lacking a trust fund today, you are pretty surely in Brooklyn, and Brooklyn is imbuing you.

The show’s curators, Eugenie Tsai and Rujeko Hockley, shun the abstract painting and portable sculpture that pervade the borough’s gallery scene. Properly, for a museum, they promote institution-dependent installation, performance, and conceptual work, including the “community practice” that tends to occur when artists live within walking distance of poor people. Demotic touches include an alluringly swanked-up

tricycle for vending shaved-ice treats, which Miguel Luciano pedals around. Pablo Helguera, of Red Hook, has made a lovely parlor space and decorated it with art works from the museum's collection, all dated 1899—the year that Susannah Mushatt Jones, a Brooklyn supercentenarian, was born. In a related vein, Shaun Leonardo, of Clinton Hill, contributes photographs of “Taxi Dance,” his colorful reënactment of a ten-cents-a-dance hall, with the price hiked up to two dollars and paid by women to men.

Particularly memorable are the adventurers. The Red Hook-based Duke Riley raised homing pigeons in Key West (the ramshackle coop is here, with live birds in it), took them to Cuba, and fitted them with either contraband cigars or tiny video cameras. Most made it back. The bird's-eye videos of cities and sea, with wing-flap sounds, flabbergast. Videos by William Lamson, of Boerum Hill, demonstrate an apparatus that lets him appear to stand on the water of a rustic river.

The show suffers a bit from an air of the art-school thesis project, typifying a time when competition for notice among tyro artists, setting in too early, abets reliance on received ideas and styles. The collective BFAMFAPHD (the initials of academic degrees) spreads a homeopathic wet blanket on the show's high spirits with statistical documentation of the hard lots of current graduates—the staggering number of artists, debt burdens, iffy prospects. The bonus bummer of a group discussion among veteran local artists, in the show's catalogue, circles the drain of Topic A in the daily life of art anywhere: real estate. But, over all, effervescence predominates. Anything can happen when enough artistic ambition and critical exasperation cram into patches of urban geography. Top up your MetroCard. ♦



*Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1998 and is the magazine's art critic. He is the author of *“The Hydrogen Jukebox.”* [Read more »](#)*

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