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Worth the Ride: 5 Surprising Exhibition Spaces in Upstate New York ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y.

Hessel Museum of Art

What exactly is it that art galleries do? An illuminating exhibition, “The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery & American Fine Arts, Co. (1983-2004),” at the Hessel Museum, addresses that question in a survey celebrating the gallerists Pat Hearn and Colin de Land. The two answers it offers, in a broad sampling of art and documentary material, are openly contradictory (and both right): Galleries provide a generous range of culturally enfranchising work that is free to all, while also grievously debasing culture by commodifying it for the benefit of a wealthy few.

And galleries are in danger. Today’s art showrooms, relics of a smaller, clubbier art scene, have lately been challenged by the proliferation of global art fairs, by online shopping’s assault on all brick-and-mortar retailers and by the inexorable rise in real estate prices.

A few decades ago, Ms. Hearn and Mr. de Land seemed to foresee what was coming. As colleagues and partners (they married in 1999) who ran separate but mutually supportive galleries beginning in the 1980s — hers under her own name, his most lastingly as American Fine Arts, Co. — they reshaped their businesses, balancing public good and private enterprise with a flair that has been seldom duplicated.



An undated photo of Colin de Land and Pat Hearn, the art dealers celebrated in the exhibition “The Conditions of Being Art,” at the Hessel Museum at Bard College. Credit Colin de Land Collection, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution

On the one hand, they co-founded the first Gramercy International Art Fair, in 1994, which became the gargantuan Armory Show in 1999. On the other, they showed highly conceptual — and anti-corporate — work by artists like Peter Fend, who has long been committed to exposing environmental depredations. They gave crucial support to openly gay and lesbian artists in the years when AIDS was devastating New York’s art world, and Ms. Hearn, in particular, was notably supportive of women.

High-mindedness and cynicism lived side by side. By emphasizing live events (seminars, poetry readings, stylish receptions), the two galleries can be said to have advanced the perception that art is a service industry — a provider of access to a social world and its status. They showcased a practice called [institutional critique](#), then new, that encouraged self-consciousness about how art is shown and marketed. For example, a video by Andrea Fraser, on view here, enacts a gallery tour cum sales pitch that is a pastiche of art criticism and theory. It is smart and very funny, but insular.

The galleries promoted Philip Taaffe and Peter Schuyff’s arch revisions of Op Art, and the Hessel shows fine examples. They could hardly be more different from Mary Heilmann’s lush and intuitive abstractions on canvas, and Jessica Stockholder’s equally painterly assemblages of commercial goods, also on view here. The sheer heterogeneity could be called a kind of sales strategy — something for everyone — and also an earnest commitment to democratization.



Elements of Renée Green’s installation, which uses printed toile, in the “Conditions of Being Art” show. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



Ms. Green's fabric looks 18th-century, but it has images of black nuns and goddesses and white lynching victims. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times.

Art based on cultural critique often has a short shelf life. But one work that has grown ever more timely is Lincoln Tobier's 1992 media analysis, "Roger Ailes in Context," recently updated. Mr. Ailes is gone, but his media empire, which includes Fox News, has hardly diminished. Stingingly current, too, is Renée Green's installation, which uses printed toile that looks as if it were from the 18th century. Come closer, and you see that images of French aristocrats have been replaced by images of black nuns and goddesses, and well-dressed white lynching victims hang from trees.

Ms. Hearn, trained as an artist, and Mr. de Land, who studied philosophy and linguistics, were both close to the artists they represented; Mr. de Land made art pseudonymously as J. St. Bernard and, when collaborating with Richard Prince, as John Dogg. Both dealers opened galleries in the East Village during its short season as an art center, along with the directors of Gracie Mansion, Civilian Warfare, Fun Gallery and Nature Morte.

When the 1987 market crash caused rents to drop, they moved elsewhere. But the two galleries are inseparably linked to the '80s East Village scene, with its punk clubs and out-all-night energy. Much of this can be gleaned from the archival material included in the Hessel exhibition, which was curated by Jeannine Tang, Lia Gangitano and Ann Butler. (There is also a richly informative catalog.)

Along with evidence of rollicking good times, the photographs, news releases and correspondence deliver their share of heartbreak. Nearly everyone involved, it seems, was young and charismatic, and far too many died far too soon. That includes Ms. Hearn and Mr. de Land, who succumbed in uncannily quick succession to cancer: she in 2000, he in 2003.

Their legacy is complicated. The galleries that now poach most freely on the territory of nonprofits are such mega-brands as Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth and David Zwirner, which devote their vast real estate to museum-quality exhibitions in which little of the art is for sale. At the same time, the gallery scene is once again diversifying, as is demonstrated by a wealth of out-of-town upstarts joining some established venues.

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Open Thursdays through Sundays, Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; 845-758-7598, bard.edu/ccs.