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East End? It's Only Beginning! At Last, the Hamptons Is Attracting Edgy Art to Match Its Glitzy Collectors

Forget the beach—get thee to a gallery

By Andrew Russeth and Michael H. Miller
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Martos Gallery's summer outpost in Bridgehampton. (Courtesy Martos Gallery)

A few weeks back, as the sky rained buckets on the East End of Long Island, a random sample of the New York art world was huddled inside a white tent in the expansive forested backyard of the Watermill Center for the institution's summer benefit. It was mostly dealers, collectors and some artists, with a few obligatory celebrities thrown into the mix (Donna Karan, Jay McInerney, Lou Reed, Rufus Wainwright, etc.). The party has always had a reputation as opulent, but the 19th annual benefit had done away with the more contrived dress codes of previous years ("Cuban chic" in 2003, "wild chic" in 2008) for a more directly artistic reference: "Pop," according to the invitation.

The evening was a decidedly dark take on the theme, though—more Warhol's "Disaster" series than his Campbell's soup cans. Most of the guests stood

miserably by the bar, sheltered from the weather, but braver attendees trudged through the muck—which the ground in the surrounding forest had become—in evening gowns and high heels to take in some of the live performances happening all over the property. Shirtless men were throwing nails at a woman in magnetic body armor, and invited some of the soggy visitors to do the same. Performers clad all in black, faces obscured by fabric except for a slit revealing their emotionless eyes, occasionally emerged menacingly from the woods. A man in black spandex shorts wore a large yellow globe over his head, which—unfortunately for him—was tied tightly to two trees that he attempted to pull himself away from in the mud. Beneath the veil of the boozy party and the sheets of cold rain, this benefit was taking itself seriously as a site-specific art installation.

There was also another respite from the weather: inside the Watermill Center was the first major exhibition devoted to Mike Kelley since his death earlier this year. The area has long been a vital workplace for artists from Thomas Moran to Jackson Pollock to Eric Fischl, but the art exhibited there has developed a reputation in recent decades for being out of date or insubstantial. The work may finally be catching up to the tastes of the collectors who spend their summers there.

There is a hipster side to the Hamptons. Dealer Edsel Williams's Amagansett gallery Fireplace Project was a leader in this group; it opened in 2006 and went on to present projects with downtown stars like Aaron Young, Agathe Snow and Terence Koh. More recent additions to Amagansett are Sara De Luca's Ille Arts, which shows artists like Mary Heilmann and Stephen Westfall, and a brand new branch of Brendan Dugan's West Village bookstore/gallery Karma Books. Mr. Dugan opened on Saturday with an exhibition of work by Dan Colen, and has planned a September show by Piotr Uklański, who will also have work at Fireplace Project, in a show organized by Manhattan dealer Michele Maccarone that opens Aug. 17.

But in recent years East Hampton has also become fertile ground for new galleries. The Drawing Room, which focuses on postwar art, opened in town in 2004, and Eric Firestone, whose taste skews more toward contemporary and street art, arrived in 2010. Last year, curator Hilary Schaffner and artist Ryan Wallace opened Halsey Mckay, where they regularly show the young artists one might typically see on the Lower East Side, like Lauren Luloff, Ruby Sky Stiler and Denise Kupferschmidt.

Ms. Schaffner grew up in the area, and can trace her family's presence there back to the 1600s. "They were farmers, ministers," she said. Mr. Wallace's wife's family has a house there as well. He'd made art in the Hamptons, and it seemed natural to create a venue there for emerging artists. "We were really interested in

bringing that energy to the area as a way to continue the historical lineage and bring attention to artists we're really interested in," Ms. Schaffner said.

Their first space on Newton Lane, where a number of venues have set up shop, was once a bar that Pollock frequented. They lost that lease, but recently reopened not far away, in an old poster shop that they renovated into a two-story gallery.

"For us, it was really exciting to have the opposite of the art world schedule," Ms. Schaffner said. While most Manhattan galleries present breezy summer shows and close for August, Hamptons galleries are bustling. "It's a seasonal space, and that's really challenging and scary as a business owner."

So the gallery keeps its summer shows short. A recent three-week exhibition called "Friends," juxtaposed Andrew Kuo's deadpan paintings (one is a graph charting "Troubles on 6/26/12": e.g. "Strip-mall Chinese food probably doesn't love us as much as we love it.") with prints of stand-up performers by Sara Greenberger Rafferty. Next up is a two-person show with Eddie Martinez and José Lerma. The gallery's "summer group shows" begin in the fall.

"We are taking a major risk," Ms. Schaffner said. "You're selling emerging artists, the price points are lower and you have a three-month window. Fortunately for us, it's working."

About 50 yards down the block is the storefront where rare book and art dealer Harper Levine opened his Harper's Books two years ago, moving it there from a small above-ground space down the street. It's next door to Glenn Horowitz, the book- and art-dealing pioneer who opened in East Hampton in 1992. "Summer is definitely the time when business happens," Mr. Levine said, but added that "the Hamptons has become a much more year-round destination."

Harper's began as a shop for rare art and photo books, but Mr. Levine also organizes shows. Currently on view are slick glass sculptures by Steve Miller printed with X-rays of plants and animals from Brazil, along with artist books and drawings. In years past he's done shows with Martin Parr, Matt Weber and Alex Soth.

For Mr. Levine, it's not just the art calendar that sets the South Fork apart from New York. Galleries can be more inventive, showing books as well as art, openings are more laid-back and artists are more accessible. "Given how chichi the Hamptons *can* be," he said, "the art scene here is actually what's really down to earth versus everything else. It's the reverse of what you would think."

To gauge how the Hamptons is juggling the international art world and local concerns, just look at the two institutions that have long served as anchors for that art scene, the Parrish Museum in Southampton and Guild Hall in East Hampton. The Parrish hired starchitects Herzog and de Meuron to design a new building set to open in November. Its upcoming program strikes a balance between international names like Malcolm Morley and Hamptons heroes like Ross Bleckner, David Salle and Mr. Fischl. Guild Hall frequently presents famed local artists, and on Saturday it opens “Beach Life,” a 30-year survey of work by Mr. Fischl who, along with his artist wife April Gornik, is a fixture of the East End social scene. But Guild Hall has also been branching out into edgier fare: last summer brought a show of Jackson Pollock appropriations by Richard Prince, the sort of artist that Hamptons types would be as likely to see in London or Basel or Miami Beach.

Which makes sense, because those people now increasingly comprise the global elite—those nationality-less collectors who fly around the world from art fair to art fair—who have been snapping up manses for summer sojourns. “It beats the hell out of a place like Costa del Sol, where you have hordes and hordes of drunk Englishmen, who all they want to do is curse and get laid,” Mr. Levine said.

The Watermill Center’s “Mike Kelley: 1954-2012” show is not the usual digestible summer exhibition. This is hardly surprising. The center, which bills itself as a “laboratory of performance,” has no small amount of artistic clout: its president is the experimental director Robert Wilson, who is perhaps most famous for creating the opera *Einstein on the Beach* with Philip Glass. “Mike Kelley” is a dark show, both literally and figuratively. In the first room, devoted to Kelley’s “Kandor” series, based on the birthplace of Superman, the main light source is the illuminated cardboard model of the fictional city, which glows white amid all that blackness. On the wall is a work from 2000 that approximates an optimistic construction-site billboard: “Kandor-Con 2000/Looking Toward the Future/0.0002% Completed/99.9998% Remaining.”

It is difficult to look at these late-period works by Kelley and not be reminded of his suicide in January. Kandor is a funny reference, the kind of lowbrow subject that Kelley mined for most of his career, both memorializing it and bringing out its menacing side. In that darkened gallery, Kandor becomes a sort of fantastical, Wagnerian tragic symbol: a once-great city, shrunken by a villain, which our hero must rescue from his destroyed home planet, gazing at it in his Fortress of Solitude and unsure of how to restore it. The work is never done; there is always more to do.

This retrospective could have easily fit in at MoMA or the Whitney, but the show arrived at Watermill through a conversation between its curator, the Hamburg, Germany-based collector Harald Falckenberg, and Mr. Wilson. Several years

ago, Mr. Falckenberg curated a similarly inspired show at Watermill of work by Paul Thek, an artist whom Mike Kelley wrote about in 1992, leading to Thek's first retrospective and essentially pulling him out of obscurity. ("I am convinced that this development is due to the initial essay of Mike Kelley," Mr. Falckenberg writes in his catalog foreword.) Mr. Wilson also happens to be president of the Thek estate.

The considerable gap in contemporary art left by Kelley's suicide is most apparent in his video works, several of which are projected upstairs at Watermill in rooms with tinted windows and all the lights turned off. In *Family Tyranny*, shot in a community television studio over the course of a day with the artist Paul McCarthy, Kelley plays an abused child and Mr. McCarthy takes on the role of the violent father. Kelley weeps and howls while Mr. McCarthy calls him a "piece of shit" or "daddy's little boy" and tries to spank him. It is difficult to watch, and it looks like it was even more difficult to make—at times, the masquerade of their characters lifts and their suffering is eerily apparent.

Just down the road in Bridgehampton is a decidedly more cheerful domestic scene, "Creature from the Blue Lagoon," a group show curated by Bob Nickas inside the rented summer home of art dealer Jose Martos. Here, work by 40 artists is seen in its natural environment.

The show is a reminder that before there were rich collectors in the Hamptons, there were artists. They have completely overtaken this house. On the porch are two paintings, made with photo plates, by Ryan Foerster. In the shed, Servane Mary installed silkscreened images of Julie Newmar as Catwoman on mirrored Plexiglas. Johanna Jackson's towel with a fruit bowl printed on it had blown into the trees out back.

Up in the attic is the show's real highlight, a group of Davina Semo's floor pieces made from broken safety glass, exposed wire mesh, spray paint and concrete. She's made of the almost unbearably warm room a kind of echo chamber: her square concrete canvases blend in with the cracked floorboards, and the broken fencing she's affixed to various parts of the brick walls causes the environment surrounding the art to bleed together with the works themselves.

In the kitchen, the art is at its most subtle. There are paintings by B. Wurtz made on the bottoms of cheap serving trays. Above the table is a brutally close-up photograph of compost by Mr. Foerster. Darren Bader has strategically placed boxes of Pampers baby diapers around the house, which the baby, sleeping upstairs, may or may not make use of. He also put a chocolate bar inside the fridge, but that exhibition was closed; somebody had eaten it.

“There’s always been good art out there,” Mr. Nickas said. “In the 1940s and 1950s, the Hamptons is where artists went and they rented cottages and they had studios. It’s also like any part of the New York quote-unquote ‘art world’: everyone follows the artists. The money, the real estate. And it goes on today. The first place that artists go to ends up being the first place they have to leave.”

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