

Despite a Wave of Closures in New York, Small Galleries Here Are Flourishing

BY ALEX GREENBERGER

Recently, it has been heartening to open SeeSaw, the app that lists exhibition openings in multiple art hubs, and regularly discover tiny New York galleries I've never even heard of. These days, you'd expect there to be fewer listings there, not more. **Gallery closures** have become a fixture of the art press here, with JTT, Queer Thoughts, David Lewis, and many others shuttering in the past few years. All these galleries have three things in common: they were small, they shaped the New York art scene of the 2010s, and they took big risks, something few others here were willing to do, then or now.

But as these spaces have disappeared, new ones seem to be taking up their mantle. A range of tiny galleries have opened in Downtown New York since the onset of Covid, filling basement spaces, dingy storefronts, and one-room units in office buildings. It feels like an experimental spirit has finally begun to return to a city whose scene has felt overly safe as of late, as though everyone were running out of steam as they attempt to meet the demands of the market.

Artists, as usual, are the people to thank. Seeking an alternative to sleek white cubes and expensive real estate, some have opened micro-spaces in the unlikeliest of places. Jared Madere is among the creators of Yeché Lange, a venturesome space in the southernmost stretch of Broadway, in the Financial District, and Noah Barker operates Empire, a Midtown gallery whose name derives from the space's proximity to the Empire State Building. Damien H. Ding opened his gallery, D.D.D.D., on Canal Street in 2022, and has even since expanded it internationally, last year launching a project space for video art in Singapore.

There are, of course, many New York galleries that are centrally located, on the Lower East Side and in Chinatown, which are already host to many commercial art spaces. Yet even here, smaller galleries are sprouting up in areas off the beaten path. Often, the only ways to learn of them are through word of mouth or by accidentally stumbling across them. (In a recent *Spike* column, critic Travis Diehl recalled hearing of what he described as "an apartment gallery in New York with an ungoogleable name and/or no online presence." Its founder declined to tell him more, saying they didn't want press.)

Perhaps it's slightly unfair, then, to start mapping this underground ecosystem of new mini-galleries, whose operators seem to pride themselves on quiet community-building. But it also seems unfair *not* to spotlight the good work these galleries are doing. Here are three standout presentations put on by these spaces.

Cory Arcangel, Theresa Duncan, and Oliver Payne at Smilers



Oliver Payne, *CRUST SHMUP*, 2024.

Photo : Courtesy Smilers

Ironically, the newest small gallery in town is the product of a curator who used to work at one of the city's biggest commercial art spaces. Earlier this month, Mark Beasley, formerly the head of Pace's performance program, teamed up with artist Laura Tighe to launch **Smilers**, a gallery located in the basement of an East Village apartment building. (Though not exactly close to any other galleries, the building holds out one unexpected art connection: it was previously home to William Wegman's studio, which was formerly located above where Smilers is now sited.)

First up here is a show of three artworks that, in another setting, may easily have been mistaken for video games. Cory Arcangel is showing a 2003 piece featuring Super Mario, of *Super Mario Bros.*, standing still in a field of blue; it's the result of hacking the beloved video game, which Arcangel rearranged such that most of its elements are now gone. That work isn't interactive, but the one nearby, a 1995 game by Theresa Duncan in which the player takes on the perspective of a young girl traversing a candy-colored world, can be enacted via a computer.

The exhibition's star work, a new Oliver Payne game called *CRUST SHMUP* (2024), best describes this gallery's punkish vibe. Using a joystick, players control a rocket that must avoid shots coming from oversized police badges. (Anarchy symbols neutralize the bullets.) None of my attempts at warding off the Man lasted very long, but the difficulty of Payne's game appears to be intentional. Remaining totally opposed to the system—and totally independent of it—is tough to do. Whether Smilers can rise to that challenge will become obvious as its programming evolves.

431 East 6th Street, B; Through February 22

Emily Janowick at Parent Company



Emily Janowick, *Wet Blanket*, 2024.

Photo : Courtesy Parent Company

Through a hatch in a Chinatown sidewalk and down a steep flight of stairs, there's **Parent Company**, a nonprofit gallery that artist Ada Potter started in a shipping container in 2023 before she relocated it to its current home on East Broadway. This teeny-tiny gallery feels even more cramped than usual because it is home to Emily Janowick's *Wet Blanket*, a new installation resembling two fallen wood obelisks, one collapsed atop the other. They take up nearly all the space here, forcing viewers to duck around and squeeze between the obelisks to get a full view of them.

Yet *Wet Blanket* does not induce claustrophobia, as one might expect, because of the calm soundtrack emitted from speakers embedded in the obelisks. Two soundtracks feature the crash

of waves lapping at the shore—one recorded by artist James Chrzan in Malibu, the other by Janowick herself in Kure Beach, North Carolina.

Chrzan and Janowick were far from each other when they took in those sounds, but *Wet Blanket* collapses the distance between them, allowing their recordings to play inches apart. This is a moving piece about bridging physical gaps between separated people, and it fittingly encourages close contact: viewers are asked to sit upon and caress the obelisks, whose booming sounds cause these structures to vibrate with inner life.

154 East Broadway, Basement; Through February 8

Pap Souleye Fall at Blade Study



Pap Souleye Fall, *PEANUTS IN MY PAST, REARVIEW*, 2024.

Photo : Photo Kunning Huang

Blade Study opened in a Chinatown storefront in 2022 after being founded two years earlier, and it isn't exactly large. But Pap Souleye Fall's current show there makes the gallery feel even

smaller than it actually is—a good thing, considering that the exhibition is in part a meditation on what it means for history to expand beyond one’s control, consuming everything in its orbit.

To navigate this fast-rising Senegalese American artist’s show, one must step around, or into, their installation *NIT, NITAAAY GARAMBAM* (2025), a bulbous structure with a sculpted green leg sticking out of its top. Titled after a Wolof proverb used regularly by Senegalese people, the installation formed from woven strips of found cardboard nearly extends across the entire gallery. The artist has adorned its inside with books—the writings of Jamaican novelist Sylvia Wynter, African film readers, a treatise on Nigerian video art—that can be perused at will, effectively turning this peanut-like structure into a library.

There is so much information here, too much, perhaps, to be consumed in a single visit. That’s also the point. Fall, also the subject of a **concurrent show** at Brooklyn’s Stellarhighway gallery, has created an intriguing show about how ideas and objects spill across continents, forming new kinds of thought in the process. To know everything, Fall suggests, is simply not possible when people and artworks are constantly in motion, for there are unexpected concepts to be mined in every nook and cranny of the universe—even within the most well-trodden corners of the art world.

17 Pike Street; Through February 9