

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in March

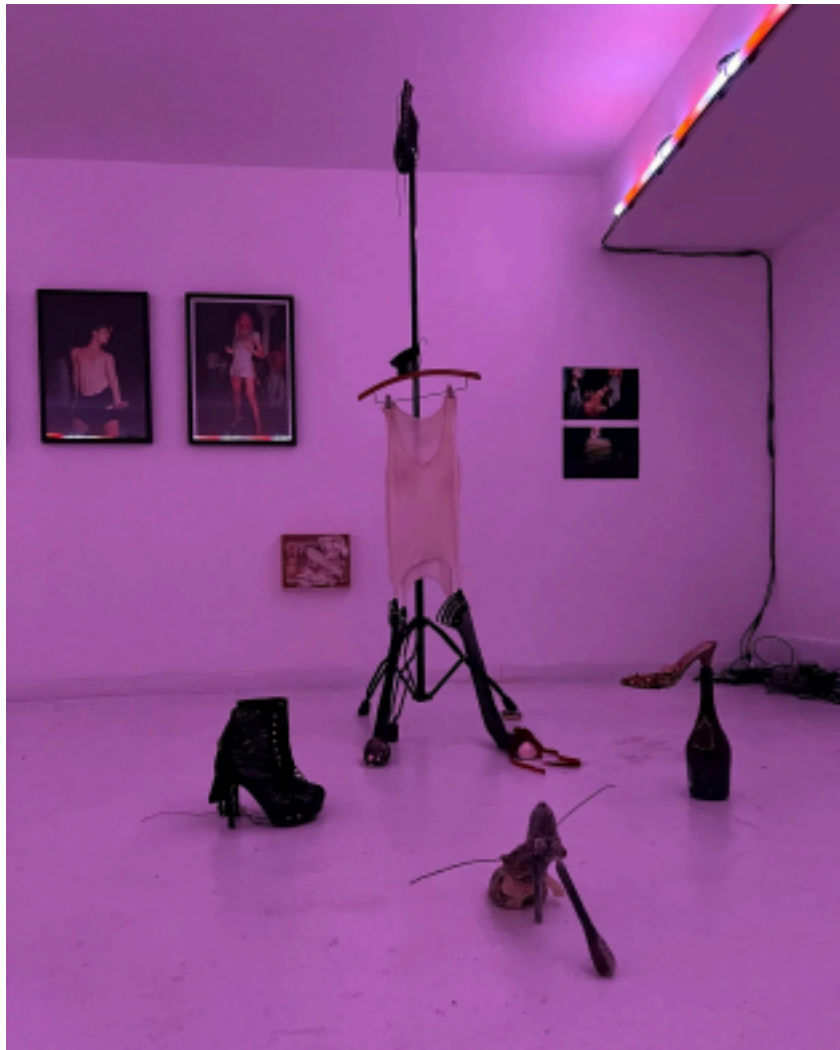
By Max Lakin

Published March 6, 2025 Updated March 20, 2025

EAST VILLAGE

‘Before the Clean-Up’

Through April 5. Smilers, 431 East Sixth Street; 646-389-0084, smilers.nyc.



Installation view of “Before the Clean-Up,” a group show at Smilers gallery. via Smilers

You can't really make out much of the work in "Before the Clean-Up," a portal to an earlier version of New York installed in a windowless East Village basement, illuminated only by a ring of LEDs that periodically go dark.

It's an appropriate, even devotional choice for a show about the nightclub scene of the 1990s, an antediluvian period of make-do spaces where club kids would converge to throw shapes and lose themselves. You see them as they would have been seen, dimly, slipping in and out of euphoric reverie.

It would effectively end in 1997 with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's resurrection of the Prohibition-era cabaret law that banned dancing in a club without a license. The party came to a halt, and with it a culture of utopian openness that this show both mourns and memorializes.

In the early '90s, Nick Waplinton was documenting the goings-on in the fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi's atelier by day. At night he went clubbing at places like Save the Robots, Sound Factory and Limelight, and took visceral and intimate photos, somewhere between party candids and gonzo immersion. His images have almost no critical distance; they appear like family portraits, clammy and tender, ecstasy-dilated pupils and all.

The being-there aura is augmented by Lizzi Bougatsos, an artist-musician and downtown fixture, whose affecting assemblages of clothing and found fragments are like skeletal altarpieces that summon their wearers as if by séance.

One reconstitutes Colin de Land, an influential art dealer who ran the galleries American Fine Art and Vox Populi. In the '80s and '90s those galleries cultivated a bohemian, anti-commercial kind of art, a spirit that Smilers seems keen to be haunted by, and from which we'd all benefit. *MAX LAKIN*