

# LOWER YOUR SIGHTS

A string of new galleries are once again transforming the Lower East Side into the city's cutting-edge art spot

By **Christopher Bollen**  
Photography by **Jim Wall**

**O**n a chilly night last month, young downtown art fans—Sean Lennon and Bijou Phillips among them—packed into a tiny gallery for the exhibition space's first-ever opening. As the teeming crowd spilled onto the street, police ordered the swarm into a single-file line on the sidewalk. When no one responded, one officer marched to his car, picked up a megaphone and announced the bar where the after-party would be held. The mob soon dispersed, streaming over to Pioneer on the Bowery.

The small gallery, Rivington Arms, certainly made a splashy entrée into New York's art scene that evening. But even more remarkable was its location: not Chelsea, but the Lower East Side. The 'hood is no stranger to brushes and canvases, but with the arrival of this space—which joins maccarone inc. and the soon-to-open Participant Inc.—the LES has once more found itself on the art-world map.

In the '70s and '80s, when the East Village had grown too expensive for meager bohemians, artists headed south to set up their studios. Nan Goldin photographed her friends in their tenement apartments there, and Warhol hanger-on Taylor Meade cut films in his kitchen. Jasper Johns mixed paint in the Essex Street building that now houses the club Chaos. Still, the Lower East Side never quite became the next Soho. Galleries simply didn't take root amid the Latino groceries. Now, however, four young women are trying to change all that.

Michele Maccarone, 28, set the foundation when she opened maccarone inc., a showcase for established talent, last November. Rivington Arms soon followed, and still to come is Participant Inc., from Lia Gangitano, 34, who once curated the now-defunct Thread Waxing Space. If this burgeoning art scene signals anything, it's that the pattern of Manhattan gentrification isn't set in stone: It doesn't always follow the arc of studios to galleries to boutiques to expensive chain stores. On the Lower East Side, trendy boutiques are already flourishing.



**WHEN IT RAINS, IT POURS**  
Gallery owners Mirabelle Marden, Melissa Bent, Lia Gangitano and Michele Maccarone (from left) are putting the LES back on the art map.

"We never thought about opening a gallery anywhere else," says Melissa Bent, 23, who owns the Rivington Arms storefront with Mirabelle Marden, 22. "This is our neighborhood."

Bent and Marden (daughter of painter Brice Marden) opened their Rivington Street space after graduating from Sarah Lawrence. "We know we're young," Marden says. "We're not trying to be some grown-up gallery with a lot of money and clout entering the Chelsea market." While Rivington Arms sticks to the white-wall, glass-window aesthetic of its Chelsea elders, a counterculture feeling takes form inside. Because they're self-funded and function without a board of directors (unlike a nonprofit), Bent says, "We can try anything we want. There are no rules." For now, they're focusing on group shows of new, young local artists like Daisy de Villeneuve, who draws deranged-looking marker portraits on notebook paper, and Marc Hundley, who makes hostile spray-paintings of lyrics by folk duo the McGarrigle Sisters.

While Bent and Marden bring unadorned freshness to the table, Maccarone has solid experience working for her. As the former director of Chelsea mainstay Luhring Augustine, she has a firm grip on the gallery business. "I'm not opening this thing out of the blue," she says of maccarone inc., which will show a stable of represented artists, half of them up-and-coming Americans and half more-prominent European talents.

Located on Ludlow near Canal, the gallery takes up two floors above an old electronics shop (which Maccarone hopes to take over some day). It burst onto the scene with a knockout exhibition by the Swiss artist Christoph Büchel, which

pushed the concept of installation to the extreme by forcing visitors to navigate through a series of filthy, tight environments. "Christoph's might've been the most illegal art show ever in New York," she says proudly. "It was an enormous fire hazard. I'm glad I didn't have the first floor for my opening show—I probably would've been caught if I'd been on street level!"

Maccarone hopes her space will become the next hot art hangout, a destination spot akin to Gavin Brown's Passerby in Chelsea. She plans to hand the basement over to an artist who would turn it into a lounge. "It would be separate from the gallery," Maccarone says. "Anything goes down there."

Gangitano's Participant Inc. is located on Rivington Street, a block west from Bent and Marden's space. When renovations are completed in mid-spring, the gallery should be as wondrously unconventional as the work Gangitano plans to fill it with: exhibits of massive multimedia pieces, as well as more animated projects including literary readings, lectures and film screenings. From the street, passersby will be able to look through an all-glass facade to see both the first-floor exhibition space and the basement offices. "I was attracted to a building where you could see two levels at once," Gangitano says.

After looking into more "art-gallery-central" locations, Gangitano settled here, claiming "the kind of audience I want is much broader than a Chelsea audience. The art world is confined to a certain geography. But the Lower East Side resists categorization—it's too diverse."

**For gallery information, see Art listings, page 53.**