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Art

## Affordable for Now, Sunset Park Rises as a Buzzing NYC Arts Hub

Participants of Sunset Park's open studios this weekend told Hyperallergic why they've shifted gears and joined the up-and-coming community.



by Rhea Nayyar  
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Judy Giera in her studio in in Sunset Park, New York. (all photos Rhea Nayyar/Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)

The New York Art Residency and Studios (NARS) Foundation's annual open studios event, *Sunset Park Wide Open*, took place this weekend with more participating venues than ever before. Since 2019, the NARS Foundation has orchestrated the community-wide open studios event to connect local artists and art organizations such as galleries, studio and residency spaces, and fabrication labs to the neighborhood they are based in. This year, beyond returning participants such as J&M Studios, Target Margin Theater, and Art Cake, the NARS Foundation welcomed newer spaces such as Yi Gallery, SPBK Studios, Thomas VanDyke Gallery, and MakerSpace NYC to the roster.

The common consensus is that Sunset Park continues to grow as an artist hub for three main reasons — convenience, affordability, and most importantly, community.



Katherine Vetne's glass fineries laying in their deflated state upon a black chest of drawers.

Established in 2018, J&M Studios offers both short- and long-term work spaces just two floors down from the NARS Foundation administrative office and residency space.

Several of the studios have brand-new occupants, such as Katherine Vetne, an artist from San Francisco who only arrived at her space last week. Vetne told Hyperallergic that a lot of her work and supplies are still in California, but whatever she could bring with her was carefully displayed within a matte black bureau and wall shelves with blunted edges for the open studios event.

When asked about her decision to move her practice to Sunset Park, Vetne said that the main draw was an already established community coupled with easy access to material resources.

“There’s a lot going on here. There’s tons of artists, and I have friends with studios nearby. When I was scoping out and visiting and trying to figure out where I wanted to be, I saw their studios and I really liked the neighborhood,” she explained. “There’s Industry City, there’s hardware stores ... and when I stumbled on J&M, the person who runs it, [NARS Founder Junho Lee], was really nice and the NARS Foundation was right above us.”



A shot from the studio of Nicole Ji Soo Kim, a Canadian Artist and NARS Foundation resident

Veronika Golova, a mixed-media artist who has held her J&M studio space for the last year and a half, told Hyperallergic that the culture of her former studio in Bushwick shifted dramatically during the pandemic. The original cohort of artists she had known there was, in her words, “mature, self-sufficient, and invested in caring for the space.” However, life changes ushered them out one by one, leaving the space open for the next generation to take over.

Golova noted that the newcomers in Bushwick were less art-aligned and used the space primarily for promoting events, producing music, and other such avenues. As the pandemic set in, the building rapidly deteriorated due to flooding, structural problems, and unruly renters as well as squatters, she claimed, prompting her to leave. Golova returned to the city, specifically Sunset Park, after quarantining upstate for part of the pandemic and began renting at J&M. So far, she’s been impressed with the level of organization and community-building the space has provided.

Regarding the state of the Bushwick art scene when she left it, Golova had mixed feelings. “There are staples in Bushwick ... I’ve seen some epic work. Really large scale, really advanced, really mature,” she started. “But overall, like the little bubbles of tons and tons of studios, I find the work kind of sloppy. And then these artists have hunkered down and nested, but they’re not actually really making anything. I’ve seen a lot of bad fashion work, too. There’s just a lack of seriousness.”

Video artist and painter Judy Giera moved into her studio at J&M in August from the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts in Midtown Manhattan. Residing in Brooklyn, Giera said that the commute has been a breeze compared to her earlier trek through Times Square.

“There were tourists everywhere ... It was just a lot. So many M & M World bags and confused European families,” Giera remarked in front of her new studio window overlooking the East River. “I feel so focused here now, and when I need to take a break I can really immerse myself in the neighborhood.”

Ten blocks down and deep in Industry City, Cecilia Zhang Jalboukh, founder of Yi Gallery, was thrilled to join this year’s iteration of *Sunset Park Wide Open*. The curatorial project’s original location was at the famous 56 Bogart Street artist lofts from 2020 through 2021. While she really enjoyed her time in Bushwick, she opted for the new location at Industry City out of interest in growth, ambition, and “practicality.”

“This space is much closer to where I live. I have two very little children at home, so I wanted to have a much shorter commute,” Jalboukh, a Midwood resident, told Hyperallergic. “I always wanted to do something here. I love this campus, I love this community. I’m seeing a lot of new people become familiar faces, and we’re making lots



of meaningful connections with other local galleries and organizations. There's definitely something happening here!"



A gallery shot of Eye Contact, a solo exhibition by Lilou Oh Yeah (image courtesy Yi Gallery)

Jalboukh mentioned that Junho Lee had initially invited her to be a studio visitor for the NARS Foundation's studio residents, but then reached out again to incorporate Yi Gallery into the *Sunset Park Wide Open* programming. She lauded the NARS Foundation's organizing efforts for the program, but brought up one thing in particular that she thinks would improve the overall experience for visitors — transportation.

“I wish there was some kind of shuttle bus for people who cannot walk these kinds of long distances,” she mentioned thoughtfully. “It’s probably really tiring for people with physical limitations to go all these distances to visit all these spaces.”



One of MakerSpace NYC’s multiple fabrication spaces in Building B at the Brooklyn Army Terminal

To Jalboux’s point, the path of venues zigzags across 25 streets and three avenues. All the way down at 58th street and right up against the water, MakerSpace NYC made its debut into NARS Foundation’s programming this year. As the name would suggest, the MakerSpace, spread across Brooklyn Army Terminal’s Building A and Building B, provides access to standard and specialized tools within a wood shop, metals shop, and jewelry smithing station, as well as industrial computer-aided design (CAD) equipment for large-scale works and textile multiples. It operates on a tiered membership basis, offers classes and school programs, and hosts several artists for five-month residencies.



Hilla Shapira, former MakerSpace NYC resident, stands with some of her garment and embroidery work for a tour of the Building B facilities.

Thomas VanDyke Gallery was another new addition to the programming. Having opened earlier this year, the gallery has its third exhibition on display, *Mushroom People*, up through November 5. In the same vein as Yi Gallery, Thomas VanDyke himself mentioned that NARS Foundation's Junho Lee reached out to incorporate the new space into the open studio programming.

VanDyke chose Sunset Park after finding a cheap apartment years prior. Originally, he noted that the neighborhood was super convenient and provided easy access to Manhattan, but then he fell in love with the community.

“I’ve really liked the reaction we’ve gotten of just people stopping in to say that they’re excited to have a gallery in the neighborhood. People who have lived here their entire



lives are excited to see culture emerging,” he said. “And we like to be a part of the community! We host a monthly litter clean-up in the neighborhood.”



Exterior shot of Thomas VanDyke Gallery

Overall, Sunset Park has been regarded as highly affordable compared to Bushwick, the neighborhood that’s now a victim of its own bubble-bursting. With all the newcomers trickling in, Sunset Park’s residents have expressed concern over the age-old problem of gentrification and being priced out of the neighborhood they’ve built their livelihoods in.

Betty Yu, co-founder of the Chinatown Art Brigade and a socially engaged artist and activist, grew up in Sunset Park and developed a project documenting the impact of gentrification on the neighborhood’s primarily Asian and Latino immigrant population.

Yu's 2018 solo exhibition in Brooklyn's Open Source Gallery, *(Dis)Placed in Sunset Park*, followed the stories of several residents in the neighborhood. After finding sanctuary and refuge in Sunset Park many Latino and Asian families have looming fears of succumbing to the rising rents. Yu's project reflects on both her experience and those of her neighbors to create an interactive multimedia map with artificial reality (AR) elements for a more immersive experience. Yu cites the NYCEDC's redevelopment of Industry City, formerly known as the Bush Terminals, as a chief factor in the leaping rents and increased corporate interest in gobbling up real estate in the area.

At this rate, Sunset Park is well on the path to becoming the next Bushwick. Yu was not immediately available for comment, but her project directs us to a few local programs defending the neighborhood from gentrification. She draws attention to UPROSE, Brooklyn's oldest Latino-led, community-based organization focused on climate sustainability and community resilience amidst land speculation and rezoning. UPROSE, a grassroots movement led primarily by women of color across multiple generations, has put together many resources to combat displacement and defend industrial retention.



Sunset Park's port side streets are lined with hundreds of repurposed industrial buildings like this one. Image courtesy Tatyana Mustakos.

It's worth noting that the NARS Foundation has also been impacted by the rapid changes in the area. Katherine Plourde, the foundation's operations and communications manager, told Hyperallergic that the administrative office and studio spaces used to reside in Industry City until 2013 when they were pushed out due to increasing rent. Since they moved into the J&M studio building ten blocks away, they've made community outreach a priority.

“Over the years, we've collaborated with local schools and neighborhood organizations to create free art workshops for kids and families, we give school tours of our exhibition spaces, and all of our exhibitions and events are free and open to the public,” Plourde told Hyperallergic. “We also want to acknowledge that while we are continuing to grow our outreach programs and consistently engage with community members and our local council office, there is no perfect solution.”

So what's an artist on a budget supposed to do if they're looking for a practical and affordable place to maintain their practice? Plourde says that it's imperative that newcomers become active members in the community, learn the history of the neighborhood, and learn from Sunset Park's original residents about ways that the arts can best serve them.

“It's critical to understand the structures that create and lead to gentrification, so that artists can understand & acknowledge their place in that system, and find ways to challenge it,” she concluded.