

Los Angeles Times
Calendar Weekend
Thursday, March 7, 2007



How a previously industrial area in Culver City morphed into the latest gallery hotspot.

Art of the new

By DEAN KUIPERS
Special to The Times

THE crowd for the opening at Lightbox gallery was pretty impressive, for what is still an emerging space in a new part of town. The reception for painter and collagist Stefan Hirsig's pop-influenced exhibition, "There Is Water at the Bottom of the Ocean," was full of established L.A. art figures whom gallerists love to see. In the milling crowd were artists Chris Wilder, Rachel Lachowicz, Charles Gaines and George Stoll, rock 'n' roll designer Henry Duarte, actress Marisa Tomei, war photographer David Butow, art dealer Dan Hug and Artillery magazine edi- [See Galleries, Page 30]

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SHE'S IN: Lauri Firstenberg, with a piece by Daniel Joseph Martinez, is director of LAXART, which looked in Chinatown and Koreatown before picking a space on La Cienega.

[Galleries, from Page 29]
tor Tulsa Kinney.

It was a stormy Saturday night, and owner Kim Light seemed pleased at the turnout, achieving a kind of rock-star vibe herself in jeans and a leather shirt. Hirsig's work and her reputation are part of the draw, but finally, so is the location. She is among several high-profile art dealers to have settled an industrialized stretch of South La Cienega, technically in the city of Los Angeles, but across the street from a piece of Culver City now officially designated as the Culver City Art District.

Since 2003, when art world heavyweights Blum & Poe relocated to La Cienega, only a few doors down from what would become Lightbox, more than 30 galleries have moved to the district. Why here? For starters: lots of big, empty spaces and cheap rent, in a locale just off the Santa Monica Freeway and adjacent to wealthy Westside neighborhoods where art collectors live. But it was also the chance to remake an entire area, organically, just for visual art, bringing a vitality and commonality of experience the art world can claim as its own.

Or maybe it was just the chance to party.

"On opening nights, it's like Westwood in the '80s," said BLK/MRKT Gallery co-owner Jana DesForges. "People have their wine and wander down the street. It gets packed."

Seemingly overnight, the district has achieved the kind of critical mass that makes it chic to be in, say, Berlin, and mention how you were just in Culver City. Two years ago they would have asked you where that was. Now they've heard it enough times to pretend they know.

"You can't not go here anymore," said Tim Blum, one half of Blum & Poe. "It's definitely entrenched. It's a real community being promoted extensively all over the world."

And there's a nice dividend: Locals are getting turned onto art. There's the collectors swinging by at all hours, the museum curators sniffing around, but plenty of the Saturday patrons are newbies — people from the neighborhood, often out with their kids — and they're not only gawking. They're buying.

Like a magnet

The spot on La Cienega that is now Mandrake has always been a bar — a gay bar before this, a series of delightful dives — but never exactly trendy.

At 10 on the night of Light's opening, Mandrake is packed with hipsters and pretty young things who've spilled out of now-closed galleries looking for somewhere to go. Artist Frances Stark

and Dot Dot Dot design magazine's Stuart Bailey are DJing; artist DJs, in fact, are a staple of the place. Patrons huddle in intense tête-à-têtes. Crowds push past the bright blue bar and a Raymond Pettibon drawing that laments, "I thought California would be different," and into a large exhibition/happening room hung with a collection of tote bags from art events — a show assembled by Drew Heitzler, one of Mandrake's three co-owners.

"Justin [Beal], Drew and I are all artists. That's our world," said co-owner Flora Wiegmann, who is married to Heitzler. "So we have myriad events that go on here. It ranges from a very formalized film series that's happening every other week for an entire year, to a knitting group or whatever."

Mandrake opened in September and has been integral to the area's expansion, and that's no accident. The bar "was to serve as a sort of anchor for the neighborhood," said Wiegmann, who, along with Heitzler, used to run a space around the corner on Comey Avenue called Champion Fine Art. "We just felt like the street needed a place where people could convene and take a break."

Blum and Jeff Poe agreed, and became the principal investors in the space. "It's a great neighborhood bar," Poe said.

It's doubtful Culver City's Art District would have happened at all without Blum and Poe. In January 2003, the two were looking to move their gallery from a smaller, 1,200-square-foot space on Broadway in Santa Monica

and couldn't find the right place. Other areas, from Santa Monica to Chinatown, were too expensive, too establishment or had too much of an art student vibe. They even tried to buy a building in Chinatown, but the deal fell through. For "some weird reason," Blum said, they looked at a stretch of commercial buildings on La Cienega just south of the 10 freeway, totally removed from other established gallery areas.

The corner at Washington and La Cienega was entirely industrial, a series of windowless brick buildings straddling the concrete ditch of Ballona Creek and surrounded by tire stores, an industrial lighting house and a lumberyard. But here they found a clean brick building and 5,000 square feet of space.

"The space was available, and we just said, 'Screw it. Let's go for it,'" Blum said.

This was no small event, however. Blum & Poe represents a roster of internationally re-

nowned artists including Sam Durant, Takashi Murakami, Jennifer Bornstein, Sharon Lockhart and Mark Grotjahn. Blum said he and Poe were pretty sure the collectors would come. But would anyone else?

"You can't script that. We're not developers," Blum said.

But come they did. Kim Light got a call from Poe, who once worked with her, and ended up taking another of the spaces. And then, quickly, came Lauri Firstenberg at LAXART, a nonprofit institution that had also been looking in Chinatown and Koreatown but not seeing anything it liked.

"Culver City was an incredible opportunity, since there are so

many artists' and architects' studios here," said Firstenberg, who teaches at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (Sci-Arc).

Susanne Vielmetter brought in her gallery; Lizabeth Oliveria came — one after another, all taking adjacent buildings. Two galleries — Western Project and Fresh Paint — had already been established a few blocks away in downtown Culver City.

"These warehouses or factories — mine used to be a glass and mirror factory — you could just do a lot of things," gallery owner Anna Helwing said. "And then, convenience — it's right in the middle of everything."

"You have to grow up in L.A. to get it," Poe said. "The freeway access is huge. People will come here. It's easy to get to."

New, emerging galleries followed the established dealers, including many from what Blum and others call a "parallel" art world, such as Billy Shire Fine Arts (Shire also owns the ultra-hip La Luz de Jesus Gallery and Soap Plant store).

Lesser-known contemporary galleries brought a lot of art fans and buyers eager to come to openings and get in the game. Crowds drew more crowds, and the area exploded.

"Another good restaurant in this area would be great, so put that in your story!" Helwing said with a laugh.

With open arms

On a quiet Thursday afternoon, Sci-Arc students Jarod Poenisch, Sam Keville and Anthony Lagnay stopped in at BLK/MRKT Gallery to check out a group show. The work is graphic novel-inspired, mostly figurative paintings with a razor-sharp urban edge. The trio had come to see an art-in-architecture show called "Entropy" at the nearby Koplin Del Rio Gallery, and it was their first time in the district.

"I've definitely heard a lot about it," Keville said.

"Even my parents — they're thinking about moving to L.A., and they're interested in Culver City. They live in Austin," Poenisch added.

Chances are they'll find some decent restaurants too, despite the pleas of Helwing. Patrons can retire to Beacon, a popular Asian cafe, or the bright La Dijonnaise, or get their fine dining at Wilson, the newest restaurant from Piccolo chef Michael Wilson. Surfas, the tremendously popular gourmet shop, is a favorite stop for lunch. A more recent arrival, further into downtown, is the red-hot steakhouse Ford's Filling Station. Restaurants a few blocks from the district's hub at Washington and La Cienega haven't seen a hike in business so far. But Vincent Trevino, owner

of Bluebird Café on National Boulevard, sees the potential. He soon plans to extend his Monday-through-Friday schedule into the weekends.

"With the Art District and the Ballona Creek trailhead, which is right here, and then the Exposition Line stopping right here, the weekends are going to get big," Trevino said.

The arrival of the Exposition light-rail line, which will link downtown with the district by 2010, is not lost on Culver City officials, who are working up a plan to keep an "artist influence" in the development planned around the line's terminus at National and Washington. This is indicative of the city's reaction to the gallery influx — it welcomed it with open arms.

City officials piggybacked on what Blum & Poe and others had created on the L.A. side of La Cienega by waiving some permit fees or shepherding new galleries through permitting processes on the Culver City side of the line. "It's not like we sat down and consciously said three years ago that this was going to be an art district in Culver City. It evolved," said Christine Byers, public art and historic preservation coordinator for the city, and one half of its Cultural Division.

It was a quick evolution — mostly within 24 months — and in June 2006, Byers and her colleague Susan Obrow, Culver City's performing arts and special events coordinator, began a community event called Artwalk Culver City. They contacted businesses, put musicians in the street and sent brochures home with Culver City schoolkids. In the end, they had what looked to be a new tradition. This year's Artwalk will be June 2.

"We ended up, we think, having 1,500 people wandering the streets. And it was one of the hottest weekends to date, hitting 90 degrees," said Obrow, who added that one of the galleries reported selling 21 pieces that day. "There was economic impact for the galleries and for Culver City. They seemed pleased with the response."

"Culver City gets it," Poe said. "Much better than the city of Los Angeles. They don't do much, culturally. But Culver City has been good."

How good? Poe said he was now seeing the surest sign of success: The low real estate prices that lured the galleries are starting to catch up with them. "I'm hearing about gallery spaces here going up to \$2.40 a foot. Pretty soon it'll be too expensive to be around here too." He smiled briefly. "Then there'll have to be a new area. That's the way it goes."

Getting to the art of the matter

The Culver City gallery scene has exploded in just the last few years — but, in fact, a good chunk of it is in Los Angeles too. To get to the heart of it, just take the La Cienega Boulevard exit off the 10 Freeway. Here's a look at some gallery and dining options:

Galleries

1. Blum & Poe, 2754 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 836-2062, blumandpoe.com
Tim Blum and Jeff Poe helped pioneer the area, moving in in 2003.

2. Anna Helwing Gallery, 2766 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A. (310) 202-2213, annahelwinggallery.com
Another early settler.

3. Angstrom Gallery, 2622 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 204-3334, angstromgallery.com
New branch of a Dallas gallery.

4. Bandini Art, 2635 S. Fairfax Ave., Culver City, (310) 837-6230, bandiniart.com
Approaching its first anniversary.

5. Billy Shire Fine Arts, 5790 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (323) 297-0600, billyshirefinearts.com
A Westside outpost from a champion of the lowbrow.

6. BLK/MRKT Gallery, 6009 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 837-1989, blkmrktgallery.com
An early arrival on the scene.

7. Cardwell Jimmerson, 8568 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 815-1100, cardwelljimmerson.com
Newcomer in postwar art.

8. Cherry and Martin (not on map), 12611 Venice Blvd., L.A., (310) 398-7404, cherryandmartin.com
Southwest of the scene, but part of the Culver City Artwalk.

9. Corey Helford Gallery, 8522 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 287-2340, coreyhelfordgallery.com
Opened in April.

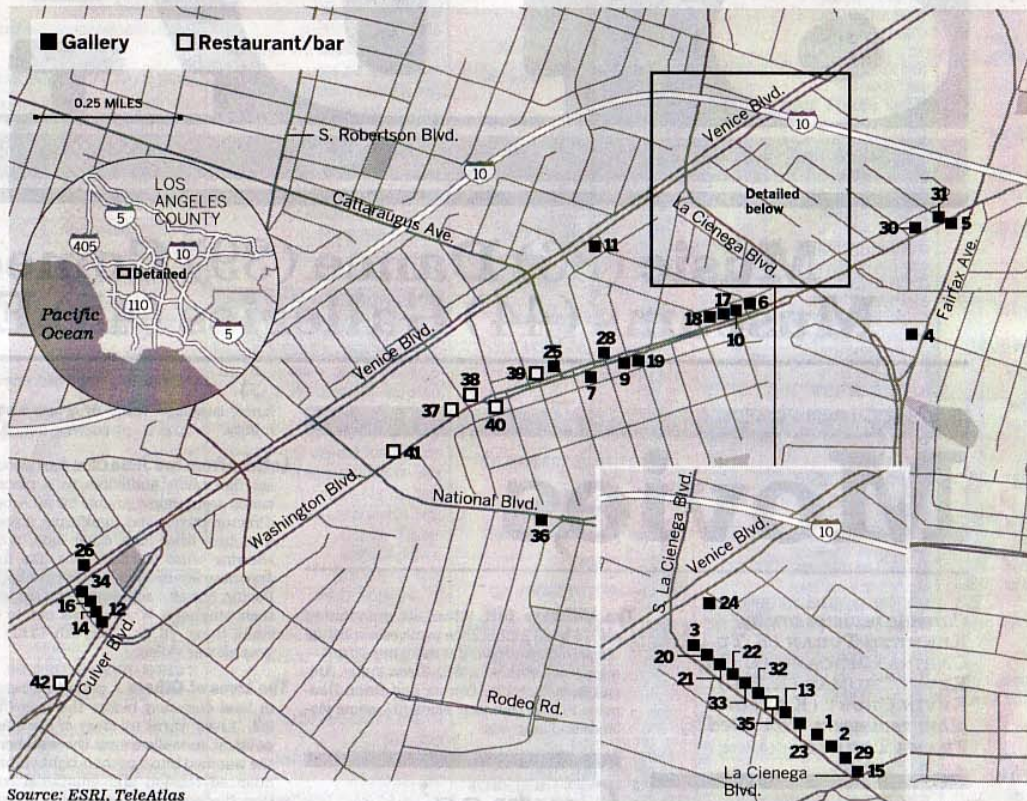
10. d.e.n. contemporary, 6023 W. Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 559-3023, dencontemporaryart.com
Focuses on abstract art.

11. Denizen Design Gallery, 8600 Venice Blvd., L.A., (310) 838-1959, denizendesigngallery.com
Art meets furniture and household.

12. Fresh Paint Art Advisors, 9355 Culver Blvd., Suite B, Culver City, (310) 558-9355, freshpaintart.com
Gallery and consultancy.

13. George Billis Gallery L.A., 2716 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 838-3685, georgebillis.com
From the Chelsea district to L.A.

14. Gregg Fleishman, 3850 Main St., Culver City, (310) 202-6108, greggfleishman.com
Furniture, architecture and art.



15. Harvey Levine Gallery, 5902 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 614-7642, levinegallery.com
Emerging artists; space may move.

16. Hedi Khorsand Gallery, 3850 Main St., Culver City, (323) 650-8980, hkkfineartgallery.com
A West Hollywood transplant.

17. Kinkead Contemporary, 6029 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 838-7400, kinkeadcontemporary.com
Made the scene in September.

18. Koplin Del Rio, 6031 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 836-9055, koplindelrio.com
Another WeHo transplant.

19. The Lab 101 Gallery, 8530-B Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 558-0911, thelab101.com
Moved from Santa Monica in 2004.

20. L.A. Contemporary, 2634 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 559-6200, lacontemporary.com
A recent arrival.

21. LAXART, 2640 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 559-0166, laxart.org
A leading L.A. nonprofit.

22. Lightbox, 2656 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 559-1111, lightbox.tv
Another high-profile gallery.

23. Lizabeth Oliveria Gallery, 2712 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 837-1073, lizabeltholiveria.com
In the heart of "gallery row."

24. MC, 6086 Comey Ave., L.A., (323) 939-3777, mckunst.com
Part of the early wave.

25. Museum of Design Art and Architecture, 8609 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 558-0902, modaagallery.com
Emphasizes art and architecture's "symbiotic relationship."

26. The Museum of Jurassic Technology, 9341 Venice Blvd., Culver City, (310) 836-6131, mjt.org
Off-the-wall curiosities.

27. Overtones Gallery (not on map), 11306 Venice Blvd., L.A., (310) 915-0346, overtones.org
Southwest of the scene, but on Culver City Artwalk.

28. Project, 8545 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 558-0200, project.bz
Launched in 2005.

29. Sandroni Rey, 2762 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 280-0111, sandronirey.com
Relocated from Venice in 2004.

30. sixspace, 5803 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (323) 932-6200, sixspace.com
Moved from downtown L.A. in '05.

31. Susanne Vielmetter, 5795 W. Washington Blvd., Culver City, (323) 933-2117, vielmetter.com
A veteran gallerist.

32. Taylor De Cordoba, 2660 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 559-9156, taylordecordoba.com
Founded in April 2006.

33. walter maciel gallery, 2642 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 839-1840, waltermacielgallery.com

Newcomer with SF roots.

34. Western Project, 3830 Main St., Culver City, (310) 838-0609, western-project.com
On the scene in 2003.

Bars and Restaurants
35. Mandrake, 2692 S. La Cienega Blvd., L.A., (310) 837-3297, mandrakebar.com
A hub where artists kick back.

36. Bluebird Café, 8572 National Blvd., Culver City, (310) 841-0939, bluebirdcafe.com
Sandwiches, salads, cupcakes.

37. La Dijonnaise, 8703 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 287-2770, ladjonnaise.com
Croissants and more.

38. Beacon, 3280 Helms Ave., L.A., (310) 838-7500, beacon-la.com
Celebrated Asian cuisine.

39. Wilson, 8631 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 287-2093, wilsonfoodandwine.com
Michael Wilson's adventurous fare.

40. Tea Forest, 8686 Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 815-1723, teaforest.com
A cute tea shop.

41. Café Surfas, 8777 W. Washington Blvd., Culver City, (310) 558-1458, cafesurfass.com
The restaurant supply store's cafe.

42. Ford's Filling Station, 9531 Culver Blvd., Culver City, (310) 202-1470, fordsfillingstation.net
Ben Ford's "gastropub."