

So Long, SoHo

New York's contemporary art scene has left the neighborhood it once dominated for West Chelsea.

By Necee Regis

The streets of West Chelsea can be unforgiving. On a hot day, the sun beats down on treeless pavement. In winter, winds whip from the nearby Hudson River, unimpeded by the skyscrapers that dot much of Manhattan. There's no subway station nearby, and restaurants are few. But if all of that sounds bleak, it shouldn't. Beauty is all around in West Chelsea if you know where to look.

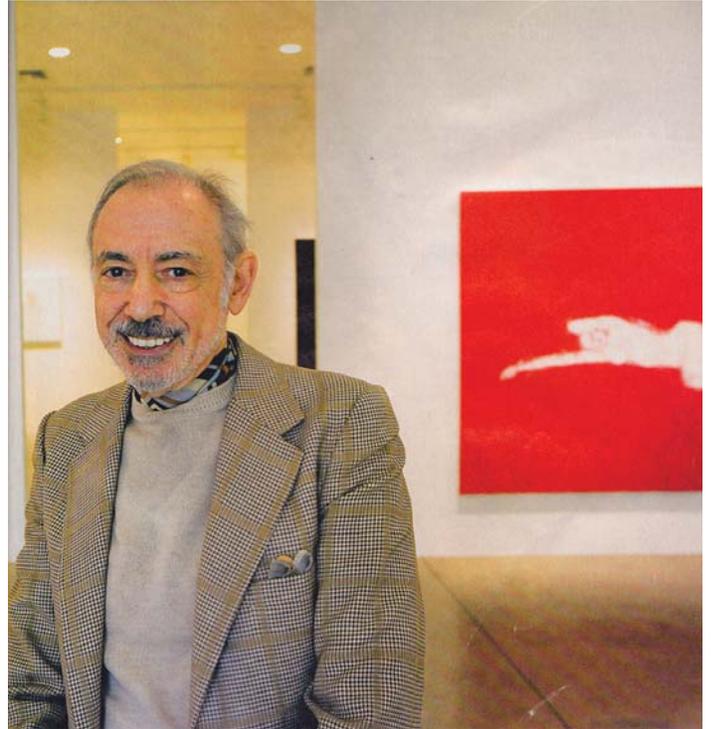
Behind the gritty façade of this unadorned, industrial neighborhood that stretches roughly from Ninth Avenue west to the Hudson and from 15th Street north to 30th is a massive collection of contemporary art. For the past decade and a half artists have moved out of SoHo, the neighborhood 20 blocks or so southeast, and other parts of New York and into Chelsea, making it the center of New York's art-for-sale scene and more.

"Chelsea has become the world's showcase for contemporary art," says Jason Edward Kaufman, chief U.S. correspondent for Britain's respected *The Art Newspaper*. "There's no other place on the planet that you can find such a high concentration, and such a high level, of contemporary art. Some cities have museums that rival New York's—like London, Paris, Berlin—but the gallery scene in Chelsea is without equal anywhere and sets New York a notch above."

That impressive gallery scene started humbly. In 1989, the Dia Art Foundation and a gallery showing modern Italian art that was open by appointment were the only two galleries operating in West Chelsea. That same year, nearly 250 galleries were doing business in SoHo. Fifteen years later, Chelsea has 214 galleries to SoHo's 53.

Call it the Starving Artist Exodus. In recent years, SoHo's rents have surged as retailers and restaurants moved in en masse. Gallery owners were squeezed out in the process, and sought out less expensive digs. They found them among the grimy buildings of West Chelsea.

Literally, in Stephen Haller's case. Haller, who spent 20 years on the top floor of a tall building in SoHo, moved to West Chelsea four years ago, putting his gallery inside an old garage. He gutted the interior, covered the greasy mechanic's pit with flooring, added new lights and windows, and ended up with triple the space he had in SoHo. Since Haller moved in, he's seen numerous other galleries follow.



"Chelsea is now the center of the art world," Haller says. "We have museum directors, major curators, and collectors visiting us from all over the world, on a daily basis. In two or three days they can see everything. People also like to see all the different designs and renovations in each gallery."

Wending your way about the streets in West Chelsea, some of the renovations stand out more than others. Some street-level gallery spaces feature 12-foot glass and steel doors that open to spacious exhibition rooms, like at Matthew Marks or the Stephen Haller Gallery. Other spaces aren't as obvious—some sit almost hidden inside buildings with only a dingy, painted door serving as a clue that there are several small galleries within. And then there are large buildings like 529 W. 20th St., where many people take the elevator to the top floor and walk, almost Guggenheim-like, down stairwells, visiting galleries at every level.

"Some multistory buildings have become like department stores of art," Kaufman says. "You can go from gallery to gallery, first on one floor, then on another. The galleries are spacious, and they're all free. They want people to come in and see them."