

Arts scene in the Bronx is enjoying a new breath of life, artists say of recent wave of group exhibits

Bronx art groups collaborate and flourish

Tanyanika Samuels / New York Daily News
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Some are calling it a “renaissance.” Others call it “magic.” Whatever the catch word, in art circles around the Bronx, there’s an electricity in the air. In the last week, at least four major group shows opened here, including *This Side of Paradise* at the Andrew Freedman Home and *Home is Where the Bronx Is* at Longwood Art Gallery. The exhibits come on the heels of the borough’s first showing in the acclaimed Armory Show last month; and the Bronx Museum of the Arts switch to free admission.

“There is a buzz, to say the least,” said [Deirdre Scott](#), who heads the non profit cultural group, Bronx Council on the Arts. “A lot of new things are going on in terms of new players coming on to the scene,” Scott said. “Folks collectively seem to be more open and saying ‘Let’s make something happen.’”

The momentum has been building for some time. The first wave of young artists started moving into Mott Haven around 2002. “We had a really small, high energy group at that time,” said artist [Linda Cunningham](#), of the Bronx-ArtSpace gallery in Mott Haven.



Artist Xavier Figueroa with his art installation "The Conversation Piece" at Longwood Art Gallery.

Viorel Florescu for News/STR

In 2004, some artists came together to hold the first Mott Haven studio tour, where artists opened their doors to outsiders - and each other. It was a tremendous success, but it came at a price. Realtors picked up on the budding artist colony and loft rents skyrocketed. “The market was harsh for everyone,” Cunningham said. “Many people had to move.”

Artist Melissa Calderón fled to Norwood after her landlord raised her rent \$1,000. “Here we were building this community only to become victims of its success,” she said. Every two years, new artists came, then left for more reasonably priced neighborhoods with better amenities.

In the midst of the upheaval, the Bronx Council on the Arts started its Bronx Culture Trolley. As it does today, the bright red trolley shuttled visitors to arts venues in the South Bronx on the first Wednesday of every month. Suddenly, there was a way to reconnect the decentralized artist community. “I looked forward to first Wednesdays,” said [Calderón](#), 37. “It was a time when people would come down for whatever was happening. I really believe that kept the community that was fracturing together.”

Over time, as artists forged partnerships, it became clear to many that the Bronx was being overlooked in the art world. “The local arts scene wasn’t really getting its just dues,” said artist [Xavier Figueroa](#), 43. “There’s a lot of great talent here but people are so focused on the 1970s



Linda Cunningham at BronxArtSpace at 305 East 140th St.
Photo: Michael Schwartz for New York Daily News

and the denigration of the Bronx that they won’t look past that. We basically all said ‘We have to make this happen for ourselves.’”

That realization was happening on all levels. In recent months, a coalition of gallery and museum directors have been meeting to brainstorm partnerships. “In the past, these kind of collaborations haven’t happened as much in part because everyone is caught up in the day to day,” Scott said. “But now we’re really starting to come together and realize that we are not competing, that we are all in this together.”

Artist Daniel Hauben, 55 of Kingsbridge, agreed. “There were always separate cliques. Now, people are coming together more in a way I haven’t seen in the past,” he said.

Some point to the early success of the art shows that drew hundreds to their openings last week, as evidence of what can happen when Bronx artists unite. “A lot of folks want to keep that momentum going and grow that energy,” Scott said. “I think more wonderful things are going to happen here. Folks really need to keep their eye on the Bronx.” ■