

What happens as adventurous art galleries succumb to the rocky economy climate? Artists who no longer have a refuge inside the traditional white cube still need to exhibit and are turning to stores that sell cutting-edge clothes

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Stephen Borts, proprietor of The Light Gallery in Costa Mesa, California. Borts sells T-shirts and tiki items together with the art of mostly up-and-coming Southern Californian artists.



After her gallery closed, Monica Serra began showing her work at Mina, a boutique in Manhattan.

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The Light Gallery in Costa Mesa, California.

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Shoppers mingle in front of a large wall sculpture by artist Juan Angel Chavez near the dressing rooms at Robin Richman, in Chicago, on Jan. 18. In an effort to boost sales during this economic downturn, Richman hosts gallery openings that combine art and cocktails with clothing and accessories.

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As the Pedret eyed a standard-issue sawhorse improbably dressed up in a white turtleneck, she said, “I’d love to have that in my bedroom to put clothes over,” she said. Apparently prepared to part with US\$1,000 for a high-ticket coat hanger, Pedret, an associate professor of architectural history at the University of Illinois at Chicago, would have been forgiven.

The sawhorse, one of several by Cheryl Pope, a local artist, was on view, after all, not in a gallery, but at a fashion boutique on North Damen Avenue, a mercantile thoroughfare that is home to the likes of Marc Jacobs and Club Monaco. That it vied for attention with satin cocktail dresses and oversize cardigans was fine with Robin Richman, the owner of the shop that bears her name. She is mounting the works of emerging artists to fill space once reserved for fashion labels she can no longer afford to sell, and to pique the interest of her worldly clientele. “In this economy,” Richman observed, “we have to be really inventive.”

Those words would surely resonate with merchants across the US who have transformed their boutiques into one-stop emporiums offering gladiator sandals alongside rare lithographs and vivid oils on canvas. And these days they have as compelling a ring for scores of artists forced by a rocky commercial climate to seek new settings for their work. As the galleries that once embraced them succumb to soaring overheads and declining sales, some have taken to exhibiting in restaurants and hotel and condo lobbies. Even more are seeking refuge in the fashion world.

Exhibition in a dress shop? “You can’t say no,” said Monica Serra, who agreed to show her moody portraits, priced at about US\$10,000 each, at Mina, a boutique in downtown Manhattan, after the Miami outpost of her German gallery shuttered last month. “If the economy was different, I might have thought twice. I might have been worried that the art world wouldn’t take me seriously. But what are you going to do — stockpile your paintings because the venue is not right?”

Quite a few of her peers have adopted a similarly flexible attitude. In exhibiting alongside camisoles and candles, they have stood convention on its head: If their presence once lent cachet to the clothes, today it is the artist who seeks to borrow fashion’s luster.

Juan Angel Chavez, whose sculptures and large-scale artworks have been shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, did not hesitate to mount an installation — a raffish collage of urban street signs — in the designated gallery space of Richman’s store. “I’m a very opportunistic artist,” Chavez said as he scoped out the room, which was filled with the collectors, scholars, artists and architects who are among Richman’s clients. “If you stay in your

studio, none of these people will see you.”

Artists like Chavez have put a literal spin on Andy Warhol’s dictum that a store is something of cultural repository, the contemporary equivalent of a museum. That notion is not lost on Confederacy, a cavernous retail space in Los Angeles selling frocks by Zac Posen and Jacobs, and etchings by blue-chip artists including Francis Bacon and Francesco Clemente.

When Baco, a cafe-boutique-and-gallery opens in Dumbo in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge next month, visitors will be invited to sip mocha lattes as they try on jewelry and inspect the paintings on the walls, priced up to US\$3,000. Neighborhood artists are pleading with him to show their work, Motti Berco, the owner, said. “They come to me because they expect there will be a lot of traffic here.”

That would be nothing, of course, to the traffic at the suburban malls that are home to the youth-oriented Metropark chain that sells CDs, fur-lined hoodies and raucously colorful art prints.

A scant half-dozen years ago, in hermetic art circles, showing in even the most rarefied retail environment was veritable heresy. “Tradition dictated that art be displayed in a clean space on a white wall, with nothing around it,” said Linda Warren, a dealer in Chicago. To stray outside the confines of the white cube was, she said, to risk a “perception that the artist is selling out.”

Last year Warren broke with tradition when she oversaw an installation by Carson Fox, at Neapolitan, an upscale boutique in suburban Winnetka, Illinois. When Fox, an artist well known for her resin floral sculptures, agreed to exhibit, Warren was taken aback: “But I thought, ‘If she thinks it’s not beneath her, why should I?’”

There is also a perception that a merchant of even the finest jumpers or jeans, is a dilettante, too distracted or ill-informed to give the art its due.

“With clients there is a lot of hand-holding and a lot of scholarship involved,” said Island Weiss, a dealer in Manhattan. A shopkeeper as gallery owner? No problem, if the merchant is committed to the job, Weiss maintained. “Selling an Andrew Wyeth tempera isn’t the same as selling a dress.”

But as galleries continue to shutter — at the rate of about one a week in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, according to Kathy Murphy, who is the publisher of the art monthly *Modern Painters* — such once-rigid standards are yielding. As an emerging artist, “you do whatever you need to do — you have to get by,” said Gracie Mansion, who is no stranger to the improvised exhibition space, having famously shown and sold art works in the early 1980s from the back seat of a limousine.

Andrea Salerno, a curator, organized an exhibition last summer at the Tahari boutique in East Hampton, New York, in advance of the Scope Hamptons Art Fair. She recalled that the collectors stopping at the store didn’t raise an eyebrow. Nor did the artists, prominent figures

including Alice Aycock, Lynda Benglis and Bryan Hunt. On being approached, “the artists were all ears,” impressed perhaps by the location, Salerno said. “You can’t turn your nose up at Main and Job’s Lane.”

As long as the artist’s intention and the context of the work is not compromised, said Amy Cappellazzo, a deputy chairwoman at Christie’s Americas, showing in a retail space is “great, why not?”

As Cappellazzo pointed out, the boutique-as-gallery phenomenon, is hardly without precedent. In the 1980s, the Japanese retail giant Seibu sold lithographs by Matisse and Braques. In London, the venerable Liberty department store has long housed a gallery. The granny of all concept stores, 10 Corso Como in Milan, Italy, has exhibited artists’ works in the same selling space as billow dresses and fountain pens. Prada lent the trend new impetus in 2001 by hanging a photographic mural of the German monumentalist Andreas Gursky in its SoHo boutique. In recent years Hermes has exhibited fine art photos in its Madison Avenue shop in Manhattan.

And if stores once sought to cash in on an artist’s prestige, today it is the artist who stands to reap the benefits. Jamel Shabazz, whose photographs of hip-hop culture have been published in book form and shown at shops like Harriet’s Alter Ego in Brooklyn, said that exhibiting at boutiques has exposed his work to the influential “downtown crowd.” “I have heard from my publisher that some of my success is due to these boutiques,” said Shabazz, who work was shown recently at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Nor does it much matter that some cutting-edge merchants juxtapose wares in ways once deemed unthinkable. At Confederacy, in boho-hip East Hollywood, a series of Julian Schnabel etchings, marked at US\$12,000 a piece, face off against a row of swaybacked mannequins wearing radically abbreviated underwear. Ilaria Urbinati, a partner in the shop, with the actor and DJ Danny Masterson, recalled that it was her mother, the respected Los Angeles dealer Fiorella Urbinati, who encouraged her to take a swipe at convention.

“I was shocked at first: My mother is such a huge art snob,” the younger Urbinati recalled. “But she has always told me that in the art scene you have to be innovative.”

Such inventive strategies whet consumer appetites and even those of dealers. Steven Borts, the owner of the Light Gallery in Costa Mesa, California, which sells both clothes and pieces by surf, skateboard and tiki artists, was mildly surprised to find that galleries had taken note. “They see that we’ve taken a risk,” he said, “and that we’ve been drawing pretty goods crowds.”

Not long after he mounted shows of tiki art, and the hand-shaped surfboards of Rory Russell, the pipeline legend, neighboring galleries held similar shows. Borts was delighted.

“It feels good to be an influence,” he said.

All dressed up like
art galleries