



BEHIND THE SCENES

THE BALLAD OF BUSHWICK

AN ARTISTIC COMMUNITY SLOWLY VANISHES

Before I considered moving back east from California, several young painters in the New York area were piquing my interest. When I eventually relocated to Manhattan in 2013 and got to know the city's art scene, I discovered that most of the artists I admired not only knew each other, but could be found in one North Brooklyn neighborhood.

I soon realized that my desire for camaraderie and a sense of belonging was not being fully satisfied by visiting friends scattered around New York City. I had experienced the benefits of a tight-knit creative community before — with painting pals in my Maryland high school, then at Odd Nerdrum's compound in Norway, and most recently in a San Francisco warehouse full of studios. It was time to meet the painters out in Brooklyn.

Someone had suggested Adam Miller as a first point of contact. At Jean-Pierre Arbeleda's gallery opening in SoHo, I first met Adam, his soon-to-be wife, Alexandra Pacula, Martin Wittfooth, and Brad Kunkle, as well as Jean-Pierre himself and his soon-to-be wife, Hannah Yata. I liked them all very much right from the beginning. I felt excited to find a circle of artists who were about my age and making realist paintings with both contemporary flair and historical inspiration.

As the lease of my Greenwich Village apartment came to an end, I arranged to visit Adam Miller's studio in Brooklyn. From Union Square, I took the L subway train eight stops eastward into



a landscape much more barren than Manhattan's. Disembarking at the Morgan stop, I found derelict, graffiti-adorned warehouse buildings among toxic SuperFund sites walled off by high metal

ALEXANDRA PACULA (b. 1979), *Luminous Heights*, 2014, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in., private collection



ADAM MILLER (b. 1979), *Québec*, 2016, oil on linen, 105 x 118 in., collection of Salvatore Guerrero ■ (RIGHT) Alexandra Pacula in her studio, 2013

gates and barbed wire. In the few blocks I walked from the subway station to Miller's building, I passed a concrete factory, an industrial slaughterhouse from which blood trickled across the sidewalk, some apartment buildings on the verge of being condemned, and a junkyard of broken tractor-trailers. Yikes! This was a side of New York I had never seen, and it made me nervous. Unsurprisingly, few people were interested in this wasteland east of the East River. Artists seeking cheap rent, high ceilings, and large windows were an exception, however.

Miller's four-story repurposed textile factory — officially the Venus Knitting Mills — seemed to loom out of the desolation of wind-tossed garbage and broken glass. In his studio, he was painting an impressively large 9 by 10-foot commission containing 145 figures swirling through space, all representing four centuries of Québec history. As we chatted, I learned that his wife, Alexandra Pacula, used the studio next door. Before they met, both had moved here from New Jersey.





(TOP LEFT) Alexandra Pacula and Adam Miller on the rooftop of Venus Knitting Mills, 2012 ■ (TOP RIGHT) MARTIN WITTFOOTH (b. 1981) at work on *Masquerade*, 2018, oil on canvas, 105 x 107 in., available from the artist ■ (ABOVE) JEAN-PIERRE ARBOLEDA (b. 1977), *Antediluvian*, 2019, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in., available from the artist

A COMMUNITY FORMS

Alexandra Pacula says:

Moving to Bushwick was the best decision I ever made. Just knowing that, behind each door, artists were busy at work inspired me and helped me develop. Of course, the most important person I met here became my husband. We had met briefly while he was visiting my neighbor. Then one evening, a year later, I ran into him in the hallway. We started seeing each other regularly and eventually became inseparable. It was great to be working in the same building, to get critical advice and other help when needed. We would paint all day and meet in the evenings for dinner or to hang out with other artists in the area. I met a couple of his friends, one of whom (Catalin Moldoveanu) later moved into the building as well. So many great conversations, many bottles of wine drunk and

cigarettes smoked, such great memories, and so many paintings made.

In 2006, the same year Miller and Pacula moved to the neighborhood, a group of artists organized the first Bushwick Open Studios, “a huge event,” she recalls, “that led to many connections with collectors and other artists.” Miller participated in the 2010 edition, “and in the course of one day, I met Nicola Verlato, Martin Wittfooth, Billy Norrby, Brad Kunkle, Chris Pugliese, Maria Kreyn, and Rob Zeller, and then Jason Bard Yarmosky and Matt Rota soon after.”

Many of these artists were fairly new to the neighborhood. Kunkle had recently moved from Philadelphia in preparation for his first exhibition at Arcadia Gallery (then in SoHo). Wittfooth had just finished his M.F.A. at the School of Visual Arts (SVA) and moved to a space still occupied by his good friends Billy Norrby and

Matt Rota. As the roommates erected walls and cut the space up into rooms, Wittfooth found he needed more space to paint. That’s when he and Jason Bard Yarmosky, who had just finished his undergraduate degree at SVA, started sharing a space close to the Jefferson subway station. When that commercial lease ended, they both took spaces at Venus Knitting Mills.

With all four — Wittfooth, Miller, Kunkle, and Yarmosky — living just a block from each other on Porter Avenue, it was only natural they form the Porter Square Brotherhood, probably over many bottles of wine and certainly in admiration of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of the 19th century. For some of 2013, Wittfooth and Miller even hid the initials “PSB” in their paintings. Within a four-month period, the group hosted a podcast with the same name, but this ended after ten episodes when Wittfooth, who was coordinating many of the legis-



MARIA KREYN (b. 1987), *The Solipsist*, 2018, oil on canvas, 60 x 42 in., available from the artist ■ (ABOVE) JASON BARD YARMOSKY (b. 1987), *Sleep Walking*, 2013, oil on canvas, 83 x 73 in., private collection

tics, bought property 100 miles north in the Hudson Valley town of Kingston. There he took on the herculean task of renovating two buildings while continuing to paint full-time.

JOINING THE FLOCK

It was around this time I inquired about renting a space at Venus Knitting Mills. Alas, there were no vacancies, so I moved south to help my family. Just as I began to give up on my “New York Project,” Miller asked if I wanted to sublet his studio; he and Pacula had just purchased a house in Pennsylvania. Although it might be costly, the move seemed essential to my ongoing evolution as a creative person. When I arrived, Wittfooth was working hard on an upcoming solo show at Jonathan Levine

Gallery. Fortunately, Maria Kreyn, whom I had gotten to know well while we studied with Odd Nerdrum, was at Venus, too. As we had not kept in close touch since then, it was a huge surprise to find she was a few doors down the hall, and that Rob Zeller was subletting Pacula’s space.

Most people say our building is in Bushwick, but property developers call it East Williamsburg, and the city government calls it the North Brooklyn Industrial Business Zone. Back in the 17th century, when New York City was the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant named one of its colonies Boswick (“refuge in the woods”). This name is sadly ironic, as today there is only one large tree within half a mile — directly outside Alexandra Pacula’s first studio. Fortunately, the area’s wide

streets and low-rise buildings allow its residents to keep an eye on the changing weather, and our rooftop offers sublime 360-degree views. Most evenings we gather there, with a drink in hand, to watch the sun set behind the Manhattan skyline and the city twinkle as twilight descends. These perfect moments are sometimes rudely interrupted by reminders of the immediate environment: shifting winds can bring foul smells from the garbage transfer station or the Chinese fish-processing plant.

Despite some unpleasant realities, the light and atmosphere here bring to mind what we admire in Hudson River School paintings of the 19th century. This connection to history imbues much of the art we make: Kunkle’s nature goddesses (see the article about them on page XX), Yarmosky’s fascination with the beauty of human aging, Miller’s Greco-Roman nature mythologies, Wittfooth’s exploration of human nature via representations of the animal kingdom, Kreyn’s mysticism and human drama, Arbeleda and Yata’s animals and plant-based psychedelics, Pacula’s perception of man-made structures as nature itself, and my own interest in natural forces and nature narratives.

CAPITALIST-DRIVEN CHANGE

In recent years, new luxury residential buildings between Bushwick and the East River have begun to occlude our skyline view. Change is brewing. The arrival of cool bars and Michelin-rated restaurants reminds us that extractive capitalism has now set its sights here. Miller notes that “the neighborhood has changed from a Dominican stronghold to a yuppie playland.” In 2014, Venus’s owners — a family who knew their tenants personally — sold the building to one of the city’s largest real estate developers for \$20.8



HANNAH YATA (b. 1989), *In the Shadow of the Sun*, 2019, oil on canvas, 88 x 54 in., private collection



DAVID MOLESKY (b. 1977), *Dog Hollow*, 2018, oil on linen, 32 x 32 in., private collection

Studios of Art, which had launched near Venus in 2009 (and naturally employed many of his artist neighbors as instructors).

In just a few years, then, a major portion of our artistic community has left not only the building but New York City itself. While it is easy to rationalize leaving a neighborhood that is both expensive and unattractive, the fact remains that living and working in a village-like studio community — located a 20-minute subway ride from some of the world's greatest art institutions — offers exceptional perks. Pacula says she is “very grateful there was a place in New York City that was still affordable enough for such a big artist community to form, and that I was part of it.” Wittfooth highlights the necessity of being near “artistic peers to share the same journey of struggles and triumphs.” Miller adds that his “time painting at Venus and being inspired by artists working at an incredibly high level shaped everything about me.” Unusually, Brad Kunkle moved to Kingston but then returned to Brooklyn; he admits it is “difficult to realize you are in a special moment while it’s happening, with those people, until it’s all gone. The community is not the same, even though we stay in touch through social media. I miss the ease of grabbing a coffee or seeing a show together.”

PRESERVING CREATIVE SPACES

Artists have long worked in spaces that are actually zoned for commerce and manufacturing. In New York City, this trend took off in the 1970s when landlords realized they could make more money cutting up large spaces for mixed-use tenants. By the late '70s, the city's planning department found that almost half of these spaces had artists listed as head of the household. As the artist-renovated neighborhoods of SoHo, Tribeca, Chelsea, and then Williamsburg became popular with non-artists, landlords began increasing rents.

ROB ZELLER (b. 1966), *The Courtship*, 2019, oil on linen, 48 x 60 in., Booth Gallery, New York City



In 1982, the state legislature passed the first “loft law” allowing such buildings to transition from commercial to “live/work.” This past summer, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed its latest version. I learned about the law from the distinguished art photographer Max Yawney, who also lives in Bushwick. He explained that the artist tenants in his building had successfully navigated the loft law process. Soon I realized that Venus satisfies all the necessary criteria and thus qualifies for conversion. But the only way such a building can transition is by tenants initiating the process themselves through registration with the Loft Board.

New York City is fortunate to have such laws that protect artist communities from extractive capitalism. Yet most of its artistic enclaves have already gone the way of the dodo bird; is it too late for Bushwick? More broadly, how can creative people continue to enhance the cultural life of America's cities if they cannot afford to live there? In Bushwick, many of the manufacturing buildings are now strictly residential, not live/work. Though it is pricier these days, Venus is one of a handful that still provides artists with a haven, and I am truly happy to be part of it. ●

million. Without considering who the tenants were, the new management quickly increased the rents: studios that had cost less than \$700 per month jumped to more than \$1,500.

This is a longstanding tradition in New York City, unfortunately. Rob Zeller reflects, “Artists are pioneers; they clean neighborhoods up until the realtors catch on and repurpose those areas.” As rents have risen, many artists have moved out to find bigger spaces for less overhead. In addition to Wittfooth's foothold in Kingston, Miller and Pacula (followed by Arbeleda and Yata) have moved to a lakeside community near Pennsylvania's Delaware Water Gap. Zeller now lives in Oyster Bay on Long Island's North Shore to be nearer the school he founded, the Teaching

DAVID MOLESKY is an oil painter based in Brooklyn, known for his nature narratives and paintings of turbulent water and fiery infernos. His next solo exhibition with Andra Norris Gallery in Burlingame, California, is titled *Studying Her* (May 8–July 4).