

Art Beyond Cubes: DIY Small Space Galleries in Chicago

by Whit Forrester

I am in a Ukrainian Village space, standing in front of a closet closed off with a piece of vinyl-sided plywood. It has a drilled hole which I am looking through into an installation by Jesse Meredith. The room I am in is all white, facing Chicago Avenue, with a photograph of the suburbs and a wall of stick sculptures that have been carved with phrases like “I’M NOT INSECURE YOU’RE INSECURE.” As co-curator Jameson Paige puts it, Meredith is “grappling with how people draw ideological moral lines between inside and outside, friend or foe” using a kind of vernacular language for his materials that stare into the suburbs.

In another room, I walk across a handwoven carpet made to fit the room it is in, dense in meaning and soft in texture. It’s the most recent part of a decade-long collaboration between artists Mia + Máire. Swirls of color in patterns suggest flow; colors which conjure the nexus where pristine and the polluted encounter one another hem in a drain-like phase suggesting breakdown. A text reads, “The recklessness of the perpetual now is no longer supported on this device.”

Plastic bags are sometimes utilized as the raw material for weaving, and there are several iPads playing video that documents a *Survivor*-like show with a feminist refocusing, part of a larger project on which the artists have been working. Some of this is

also a projection mapped onto the garage in the backyard, projected over more of Jesse’s woodwork. In this instance, a series of logs ask the viewer: “What blade cuts down the tree of liberty?”

For gallerist and co-curator Julia (Budgie) Birka-White, the show pushes the viewer to “resist behaviors and traditions that become normalized through habit and instead coax[es] the viewer into questioning everyday systems lest we become dangerously complacent.” The integration of the show into the space is seamless.

In the rooms where the artwork is living, you feel very much encompassed by the work. There is a table with information, a press release, an informational poster in the 13x19 range with images, a map of the space, and some background information on the show “Reckless Comfort.” I am in the Extase apartment gallery. Pronounced “ecstasy,” it is named in reference to the troubled history of feminine emotional expression conflated as pathology.

Extase is a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) space. The history of the phrase “DIY” is a bit fuzzy, but the shorthand has its first usages in reference to home repairs around the turn of the 20th century. In the ’70s, it became synonymous with the patchy, loose and fast organizing of the punk community. The aesthetic has now morphed, but the term’s operative DNA is still very much intact and at work, especially in today’s digital age. This term is a late comer to an already established understanding that this is what marginalized communities have done throughout all time, yet the specificity of DIY to the last 50 years is important in thinking about decentralized artistic networks. To call something DIY usually bears with it a history of politicized engagement.

I now am walking around an art space, Reckless Comfort, thinking about watersheds—how water falls on land and immediately starts moving towards the sea. If one were to conceive of the art world as an ecology, DIY and alternative spaces are the tributaries that feed the rivers, the mountain streams that feed the Mississippi. The community-driven apartment gallery DIY space is where work shows up first and begins

Mia+Máire, installation view. Photo courtesy of Extase.





Basement Merch Shop, installation view. Photo courtesy of Extase.

making its way through the art world towards larger forms of recognition.

These spaces have become incredibly important. Not only are projects supported, but there is larger community engagement and the development of work that resonates with the moment. It is, in retrospect, the raw material which becomes the backbone of curatorial research into origins of artistic movements and eras. They are tributaries, but they are also the ocean ridges wherein the earth's crust is created. The apartment gallery can be the place where new earth is formed.

Extase's website states its mission and goal is "showcasing the work of local and underrepresented artists, giving them a space to execute new ideas in the comfort of a home" and fostering new connections through the building of community. According to the website of The Condo Association in Humboldt Park, DIY means prioritizing "the creativity and productivity of queer people, people of color, women, and other marginalized communities" as a collective of "sex positive, anti-fascist, and anti-capitalistic humans."

Where the mainstream public may not be able to understand or accept work that is made in the present, artwork's slow rise to prominence falls in favor of the *avant-garde* and as being unintelligible to the vast majority in the moment. For instance, queer art about bottoming, such as the Gødbottom show at The Condo Association, may not have been legible 10 years ago, though today it stands as an artistic achievement and milestone for Chicago.

Extase and Condo are not alone in this. It is a growing trend in the larger world of which the art world and art market are just reflections. Identifying this need

in their mission statements, both Extase and Condo shift art world conversations and support the adoption of lenses for looking at work which critically empower those at the margins. In reverse, this then goes back to affect the larger world to which art is speaking.

The apartment gallery approach solves the problem of rent and utilities. Rent is covered by the person or persons living there, which opens up a space for art-making that is not connected with sales *per se*. Having such an intimate connection to the space means that conversations about what is possible become more informal and thus more flexible. Ambitious and experimental artwork might be a risk for a commercial gallery but, in the protected and nurturing space of the apartment, it becomes a possibility and vivacious contribution. Chicago has plenty of affordable, large apartments for such activity to boot.

Some apartment gallery owners have abandoned regular space entirely, as is the case with In/Habit roving art series. A curatorial project of Rebecca Ladida and Mitsu Salmon, In/Habit creates what they call an "open platform dedicated to holding space for brilliant weirdos, fostering collaborations between queer, feminist, BIPOC, radical thinkers and artists with various degrees of recognition in the (art) world."

The first thing on the website is a Territory Acknowl-



Jesse Meredith, installation view. Photo courtesy of Extase.

edgement, acknowledging that the United States and, by extension, Chicago are occupied territory that was stolen from First Nations. The deeply collaborative project continues from there. As Ladida states, the idea

was to rove between DIY spaces and institutional art spaces, generating work, shows and dialogue in the process. However, they also cite the struggle to be properly paid when working institutionally as a perennial concern and one which takes an inordinate amount of time and resources in addressing—time that could be spent on planning shows.

Their commitment to working between and among different art worlds reflects the goals that many DIY and alternative spaces have. Whereas this would have once been scoffed at as lofty dreaming, at the current time, when brick-and-mortar galleries are shutting down in droves, citing financial strain, it seems as though there is something to the roving apartment model which works.

In the case of Extase, this model is compatible with larger ambitions. While many DIY spaces aim to simply showcase the work of artists working within their directly affiliated networks and communities, Budgie’s experience comes from her time at Gagosian Gallery and Jessica Silverman Gallery, both in San Francisco. This experience in the blue-chip market has given her an ambitious set of prerogatives, from curatorial programming to sales to attending art fairs such as Mexico City’s Material Art Fair.

Gødbottom installation view. Photo courtesy of The Condo Association.



Gødbottom installation view. Photo courtesy of The Condo Association.

It is the art that takes priority and the working with artists around ideas for what can happen inside the constraints of an apartment gallery. These constraints of space can provide the necessary friction for the creative problem-solving and risk-taking that are the hallmark of successful projects.

It is the DIY attitude of places like Budgie’s gallery that allows artists and supporters who may be turned off by or turned away from the commercial art scene to enmesh themselves within communities of other makers to pursue ambitious, risk-taking projects. ■

Whit Forrester is an artist living in Chicago. They have shown at the Satellite Art Show, the International Museum of Surgical Science, Aspect/Ratio, the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, and at Kuir Bogotá in Colombia. Their solo show opens January 11, and you can find their work currently exhibited in the show “Groundings” at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Gødbottom installation view. David Nasca, *A Spot*, 2017. Leather, metallic shagreen, thread. Courtesy of The Condo Association.

