

# Prima Gallerinas

*As the New York art world shifts its focus downtown to an exciting new gallery scene on the Lower East Side, an emerging group of women is taking the spotlight. Meet the next generation of power gallerists.*

*By Rachel Syme*

If there is one constant about the New York art world, it is that it's always in flux. Auction prices vary wildly with the economy, trends and hot names come and go, and the gallery scene seems to relocate every couple of decades, in an inevitable cycle of artists colonizing a derelict neighborhood, making it cool, desirable and, eventually, expensive. In the 1930s and '40s, 57th Street was the place to find paintings by Joan Miró and Marc Chagall. In the '70s and '80s, it was all about Soho, where gallerists like Mary Boone and Larry Gagosian discovered—and made famous—artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Francesco

Clemente. In the '90s, gallery owners rushed into the industrial spaces of Chelsea, taken in by the cheap rents and stark surroundings. Today the art scene is making yet another migration. With the grand reopening of the New Museum of Contemporary Art on the Bowery in December, collectors are looking downtown for new work—and they don't have to stray far from the museum to find it. Some of New York's most exciting galleries have opened on the Lower East Side, and many are owned and run entirely by women. "Because this is a burgeoning area, it has allowed so many types of people to open galleries," says Amy Smith-Stewart (see page 26). "It has really opened up the playing field."

## THE MODERN REALISTS

Megan Bush (near right), 36, and Heather Stephens, 38

Run: 31 Grand, est. July 2007  
143 Ludlow St., between Stanton & Rivington Sts.

Megan and Heather knew they would join forces ever since they met, in 2000. "We agree on everything," says Heather. "We may have different tastes in music and clothing, but when it comes to art, we react to the same work." Megan, a stylist and fashion designer from Alaska who had previously owned the East Village clothing store Flood, opened 31 Grand, in Williamsburg, as a fashion studio in 1999. When she decided to morph the space into an art gallery ("styling and curating are very similar," she says), she called on friends to help stage her shows. A year later Heather, a graphic designer from Greenville, S.C., joined her on a curatorial project, and they became a permanent team. Both handle all aspects of the gallery, from choosing artists to planning openings. "It's an equal partnership," says Heather. "We run everything by each other."

By 2007, the women felt the Brooklyn gallery scene was stagnating. "There just wasn't any foot traffic there," says Heather. "We wanted the kind of visibility and growth potential that you can only get in Manhattan. The Lower East Side is active—we have wine bars, boutiques and cafés next door. Chelsea feels like a cultural wasteland outside the galleries. Our block has a casual, European feel."

Megan and Heather show realistic works by in-demand emerging artists like Barnaby Whitfield and Adam Stennett. "We discovered one of our favorite painters, Francesca Lo Russo, at D.O.C. Wine Bar in Williamsburg," says Heather. "She always served us, and one day she asked if we could look at her work. It blew me away." Their shows consistently sell out, and the gallerists treat openings like big parties made to spill out onto the street.

## THE AVANT-GARDIST

**Amy Smith-Stewart, 32**  
**Runs:** Amy Smith-Stewart Gallery,  
 est. April 2007/  
 13 Stanton St., between Forsythe and  
 Eldridge Sts.

Although she's only 32, Amy has one hell of a résumé. A curator at P.S. 1 from 2002 to '05, she's the only gallerist of this group to have come out of the museum system. She's also consulted on exhibitions for Mary Boone Gallery and Peter Norton—an important collector and a board member of both MoMA and the Whitney, who commissions a curator to design his New York apartment every year. Amy has done it two years in a row.

Hailing from Rye, N.Y., Amy says she was "always very visually oriented as a child." She adds that having a daughter (who is now 2) motivated her to leave the museum and strike out on her own: "I wanted my child to see what I have done and be really proud, and I had to do it now, while I still have a ton of energy to take risks." Amy took one such risk by locating her gallery far from Chelsea and the museum scene.

"In Chelsea, the art world is so saturated it's tough to stand out," she says. She lucked out by spotting her Stanton Street location on Craigslist. "The space is across from a high school, meaning no one could open a liquor store here," she says. "And it's on a strange block for shopping traffic. So it's perfect as a gallery." To afford the rent, Amy sold a rare Yoshitomo Nara print that she'd bought in her 20s for \$500, and got a whopping \$12,000. "That's the thing about art," she laughs. "Sometimes it really pays off."

The majority on Amy's roster are midcareer artists she worked with at P.S. 1, including avant-garde video artists Jen DeNitto and Adrian Paci.

Because she has so many museum connections, Amy has not yet accepted walk-in submissions for the gallery. "I'm trying to keep it small," she says. "I'd like to have 10 artists, tops. One day I'd like to be able to commission and produce exhibitions here, putting up the funds for the work. I'd like my gallery to feel as much like a museum as it does a retail space."

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