

PRESENTING

THE

PRESENTERS

by Kara Rooney

Most gallery and museum patrons rarely get to see the "other side" of the art world: that enigmatic space behind the closed white door of the gallery cube where exhibitions come together, careers are made or broken and a lone person titled "curator" holds the key to fame and fortune. I recently had the opportunity to speak with a number of those representatives from the other side of that wall. They were distributed among facets of the art world as wide-ranging as the high end of Manhattan's Chelsea art district to home-grown artist collectives, upstate film festivals and freelance curating positions. These "other-siders" are not removed from the artists themselves, but rather use their art backgrounds and SVA educations to work together within and through the common language of aesthetics. Bottom line, these curators are in it for the same reasons as the artists—they're in it for the art.

MFA Fine Arts Department faculty member Amy Smith-Stewart spent four years as a curator at MoMA's P.S.1 in Queens, where she worked on more than a dozen shows under the tutelage of P.S.1's legendary founding director Elana Heiss. At P.S.1, Smith-Stewart learned one of the essential maxims of any curatorial career: "Do your research." That was Heiss' mantra, a directive at which Smith-Stewart became an expert. After leaving P.S.1, she went on to guest curate at the prestigious Mary Boone Gallery and Peter Norton Collection, and has recently opened her own gallery, Smith-Stewart, in Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Schooled in art history and the studio arts, Smith-Stewart says she always had an interest in presenting work but, more importantly, an interest in the artists themselves. While she attributes much of her success as a curator to "a lot of luck and good timing," according to gallery-owner Smith-Stewart, it is just as much about building relationships. "There is a careful choreography to exhibiting art," she says. "It's about doing your homework and being responsible to both the artist and the work."

It has been a life-long dream of Smith-Stewart's to run her own gallery and leave behind the production house feel of larger institutions. As a result, the Smith-Stewart Gallery, a modest, less-than-500-square-foot storefront about the size of an average artist's studio, fosters this type of personal, one-on-one interaction in both aesthetic and form.

The gallery's opening exhibition, in April 2007, titled "Foam of the Daze," played upon Boris Vian's cult classic *L'écume des jours*, a surrealist book that depicts Paris in the 1940s—beautiful, glamorous and

ultimately tragic. As a way of commenting on "glamor's destructive force," Smith-Stewart brought together some of the industry's hottest new artists—not coincidentally, many of them from the SVA community. Kate Gilmore (MFA 2002 Fine Arts), Marilyn Minter (MFA Fine Arts Department faculty), Mika Rottenberg (BFA 2001 Fine Arts) and Elif Uras (BFA 2001 Fine Arts) were a few of the show's heavy-hitters. "Foam of the Daze" embodied the fusion of a commercial gallery with the art-house feel Smith-Stewart aims for. By moving away from the traditional white cube gallery space, a more intimate reception of the art is promoted; the place has a sense of community that is often missing in the "lofficer" austere surroundings of the gallery world.

This notion of *community* is a concept that continually surfaced in my conversations with the gallerists I spoke with, including those functioning outside of the New York City "bubble." After living in New York for a number of years, Meira Blaustein (BFA 1986 Film and Video), for example, gave up the big-city lifestyle as the head programmer for the Hudson Valley Film Festival to move upstate with her husband, fellow alumnus Laurent Røjto (BFA 1981 Film and Video). Both filmmakers, the two were drawn to the artistic energy surrounding the small artists' colony of Woodstock, New York, and six years ago, founded the Woodstock Film Festival, which has now grown to an event of international stature.

In early October each year, more than 140 high-quality films, many of them shorts, are screened in and around Woodstock. The atmosphere is laid back in the extreme, with the town's old coffeehouse transformed into an official "hospitality lounge," and most of the participating filmmakers housed with local residents. But one should not be misled by the festival's relaxed demeanor: the 2003 feature *Far From Heaven* and documentary film *Spellbound* are only two examples of the top-quality work that is shown at the festival. The seriousness of the festival, at which screenings span the international gamut, have resulted in the attendance of such high-profile entertainers as Steve Buscemi, Matt Dillon and Peter Gabriel, to name a few.

Blaustein says that her upbringing in Israel—a culture steeped in personal and artistic identity—influenced her desire to bring something to the fore that was "fiercely independent" (which has become the festival's tagline) but, at the same time, relaxed and inviting. Getting away from the rapid pulse of New York City, she and Røjto



ABOUT:
The Smith-Stewart Gallery in Manhattan.
Photo by Brian L. Smith.
OPPOSITE PAGE:
(clockwise from left): Exterior, Mike Weiss
Gallery; interior, Smith-Stewart gallery;
interior, Mike Weiss Gallery.