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When Your Roommate Runs a Gallery Out of The Living Room

By Aaron Short

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Photography Credit: Elias Williams



Bennett Smith stumbled upon an inexpensive office on Elizabeth Street after scouring commercial real estate listings. His gallery's current show features work from Ad Reinhardt, Karen Fan and Jo Kim.

Jacksun Bein planned to move from New York to London last year when the fellowship he hoped to receive abruptly had its funding frozen. The Louisiana native, who studied sculpture and art history at Cooper Union, found himself adrift without a plan for his future. One of his friends, the artist Sebastian Maseri, encouraged him to organize shows in his two-bedroom Sunset Park apartment. “My studio-mate said, ‘You should start doing exhibitions, and I could do one,’” Mr. Bein said. ““Now that you have free time, spend it on me.””

In May 2025, Mr. Bein moved his faux leather couch, love seat, glass table and rug out of a room in his Greenwood Heights apartment that became Interrobang. The studio has since hosted 14 exhibitions, eight film screenings, three performances, an academic course and three communal meals prepared by artists featured in their programs. “I feel like I’m following bread crumbs in this extreme way where every next move is figured out when it happens,” he said.

This fall, as art patrons peruse Manhattan’s art fairs and gallery openings, the city’s most intimate exhibits have unfolded in third-floor walk-ups, converted lofts and subterranean studios. Artists have launched at least eight apartment galleries over the past seven years , allowing them to enter an industry that can be expensive and alienating to outsiders.

The artist Arjan Zazueta and the writer Jennifer Bryan contemplated renting a small storefront in Clinton Hill but balked at prices that approached \$4,000 per month. Instead, they found an art studio in the basement of a four-story apartment building near Fulton Street and converted its 200-square-foot common area into REDHEAD, which they launched in 2025. “Most commercial landlords wanted a five-year or a 10-year lease,” Ms. Bryan said. “We didn’t want to feel the pressure of showing artwork and being pressured to sell it.”



Bennett Smith moved his gallery, Turquoise, from Brooklyn to Chinatown in January 2026

Bennett Smith didn’t even bother searching the market. The Indiana native worked for galleries and had ambitions to curate an experimental space. But it wasn’t until Mr. Smith visited Iowa, an apartment gallery now located in Crown Heights, in 2024 that he felt inspired to transform a room he used as a studio in his three-bedroom Bedford Stuyvesant apartment into Turquoise later that year.

“There was no way I could afford to rent a commercial space or a third space. I was doing whatever I could within my means,” he said. “Most galleries are beholden to collectors and their obligations as a business.”

These D.I.Y. art spaces are part of an eclectic history that stretches back to the birth of modern art in New York. During the postwar era, art dealers organized exhibitions of now-iconic modernists inside Upper East Side townhouses where many dealers and their families lived. By the 1960s, artists started to move downtown and showed work in their SoHo industrial lofts.

Artists continued opening D.I.Y. spaces in the East Village, the Lower East Side and Williamsburg throughout the '80s, '90s and early 2000s. Some became commercial galleries. But the city's largest concentration of apartment art spaces in the 21st century flourished in Bushwick, whose annual open studios festival once drew thousands of visitors. Jason Andrew, who co-founded the Brooklyn-based nonprofit Norte Maar in 2004, managed a gallery from his ground-floor Wyckoff Avenue apartment and organized art crawls to nearby spaces. "We were driven to create a community and a conversation about art around our neighborhood," Mr. Andrew said.

These days, apartment galleries cultivate followings through social media. Few put signs on their buildings or list their addresses online (visitors must email or send a direct message on Instagram for appointments). Sometimes their landlords don't even know a gallery is inside their building.

Unlike their blue-chip counterparts, the ambience inside apartment galleries is inviting and relaxed. Openings can take place on weekend afternoons to avoid disturbing neighbors and shows can stay up for several months.

Sometimes the mood can be too relaxed. When Nick Jorgensen, the director of Drama Gallery, celebrated an exhibit opening with a live band at his Williamsburg loft two years ago, residents complained. The police eventually showed up, and his landlord threatened to evict him if there were more parties. "I learned not to do live music anymore," Mr. Jorgensen said.

With as little as a few hundred square feet available, curators tend to gravitate toward smaller, flat works on paper and photographs. But some include more ambitious pieces. At Interrobang, an artist set up a wall-to-wall installation of spackled insulation foam held up by sticks. Mr. Bein and his roommate lived with the maze-like structure for three days before taking it down.

"It was crazy to try to get water at night," he said. "I sometimes would crawl under it if I didn't want to walk through the formation."

Artwork can even spill into narrow shared hallways and take up less sanitary nooks. Two years ago at Tutu Gallery, which has been open since 2019, an artist created a scent installation of four perfumes spritzed throughout the bathroom. "It was very intimate. People were in this tight space looking for these fragrances and smelling them," April Zyu, the founder of Tutu, said.

The artist Loie Hollowell has embraced a maximalist approach. She had shown her paintings at Pace Gallery and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum but wanted to get more involved in her neighborhood's arts scene. Ms. Hollowell and her husband spent two years renovating the second floor of her three-story townhouse in Ridgewood before opening the aptly named Apartment Gallery in June.

"You can just do the thing and then a ton of people come and you meet a ton of people," Ms. Hollowell said. "It's really that easy."

Sometimes there are sales. Gallerists register for sales tax certificates or a "Doing Business As" designation in order to sell anything from their homes. Some take out temporary insurance policies when they exhibit works valued above \$50,000. Ms. Hollowell prefers connecting artists directly with buyers.

But organizing multiple shows each year without getting paid can be exhausting. And sometimes gallery managers have to relocate quickly if their landlord raises their rent. Turquoise nearly shuttered last fall when one of Bennett Smith's roommates, who was on the lease, told him her boyfriend would be moving into the apartment soon. "It was very banal. She said, 'My life is changing, we want to live together. I'm going to kick you out,'" Mr. Smith said. He found a 500-square-foot room next to a podiatrist's office on the third floor of a Chinatown medical building and reopened Turquoise there in January.

Apartment galleries may not be lucrative but they have helped their founders obtain jobs and travel widely. April Zyu, who has featured work from other immigrants and Asian American artists, believes Tutu Gallery has given her a sense of self-worth. "There's something really meaningful about having this space where people who are experiencing similar isolation can come," she said. "It has been very redeeming."