

Artists Offer a Visual Dialogue on a Changing Brooklyn

by Nicole G. Anderson

Friday, April 02, 2010 12:00 AM



Crown Heights Gold by Monique Schubert currently is on display at MoCADA as part of the exhibition, "The Gentrification of Brooklyn." For other images from the show, go to [Brooklyn's Pink Elephant](#)

Artist [Oasa DuVerney](#) , moved to Brooklyn 12 years ago from Queens. Drawn to the warmth and the culture of the community in Crown Heights, she put down roots in the neighborhood. But over the last decade, she, like so many other artists, has watched the tide of gentrification wash over the neighborhood she calls home.

"A lot of my work has to do with power, which is a big part of gentrification," said DuVerney. "Gentrification is a big deal to me as a woman of color, a single mother and as an artist. I am on both sides of the coin with gentrification."

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DuVerney is one of many artists who addresses the topic of changing neighborhoods in a current exhibition, "The Gentrification of Brooklyn: The Pink Elephant Speaks" at the [Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts](#) (MoCADA) in Fort Greene. Over 20 contributing artists explore the complexities surrounding the issue of gentrification through a range of mediums including photography, paintings, multimedia installations and sculpture. The exhibit serves as an open forum for artists from diverse backgrounds to reflect on an issue that continues to change the landscape of Brooklyn and have an impact on their own personal experiences and trajectory.

(The exhibition runs through May 16. For information on visiting go to [MoCADA](#) For images from the exhibition go to [Gotham Gazette's slideshow, Brooklyn's Pink Elephant](#)

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"I think that amount of diversity has really given this show a kind of electricity. You don't have any real dominant ethnicity, you don't really have any real dominant gender, you don't really have a dominant style or type of art, yet it is all interwoven into the same subject matter," explained Dexter Wimberly, curator of the exhibit as he walked through it. "And when you go through the exhibition and look at what's here, every piece tells its own unique story that somehow relates to the next."

Where the Artist Fits

As they search for affordable rent and a creative community, artists often form the first wave of gentrification in a neighborhood. This pattern has been seen over and over again throughout the city in neighborhoods like DUMBO, Fort Greene, Williamsburg and Bushwick.

"When you graduate from art school, they tell you that you have to move to New York. Sounds like a great thing, but then when you move there, you realize you're probably displacing someone by moving into a place and paying more expensive rent," comments artist, [Adam Taye](#)

"A lot of times people think they've discovered a place like they're pioneers of a neighborhood. It

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is kind of an untruth." Taye addresses this attitude in his piece "Nouveau Neocolonialism," which bears the blurb, "I totally discovered this place where no one has ever lived before."

In this exhibition, artists have the opportunity to take advantage of their unique vantage point and ask questions, present ideas, and examine attitudes and behavior toward gentrification. In this visual dialogue, each artist approaches the issue with a different perspective and set of goals. While some hope to stimulate conversation or critique the development, others seek to convey the consequences of the community changes and inspire action.

A Visual Discussion

In "Location and Dislocation," [Sarah Nelson Wright](#) tracks the movement of several individuals through Brooklyn in chronological order and notes the reasons for their moves (job, marital breakup, priced out of apartment, etc.) next to the piece. She then removed the map leaving behind a large abstract constellation of multi-colored lines that illustrates that there is always a constant flow of movement in Brooklyn.

In the next room, [Valerie Caesar's](#) two photographs, "protect and respect" and "i am not scared" depict a sign left outside a building and a chalk etching on the sidewalk drawn by school children. The work portrays what Caesar describes as the "native tongue of Brooklyn."

[John Perry](#) has been capturing Brooklyn's changing demographic for 20 years through his portraits of people on the subway. "You see who comes on and off the train. And who has been getting on and off as the train goes into different parts of Brooklyn has changed over the years. You go through black neighborhoods and then white neighborhoods, so there are different people on the train at all times," explains Perry. "It [his artwork] is a very accurate barometer of who rides and who doesn't ride and who gets off and on where."

While Perry's "Series Subterranea" is more a snapshot of the vast Brooklyn community, in "Crown Heights Gold," another participating artist, Monique Schubert, ruminates on the divergent attitudes of the people living in her neighborhood. Creating a large congressional map of the neighborhood's congressional district, she added gold designs that emulate looping barbed wire as a way of illuminating the differences between the older communities in her neighborhood and the new people moving in.

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"I think it is an interesting metaphor for people living in community together with their own individual boundaries because barbed wire tends to become this organic element in the urban landscape where branches and vines will grow on top of it or things fall or blow into it and get caught. It becomes this catchall place for all this sort of detritus that's happening during this re-establishing of territories. So basically the gold structure for me represents any individual projected idea of what this neighborhood is going to be. For some people it is home and for other people it is this weird scary place," said Schubert.

In the last room of the exhibit, "Law of Growth" by the artist Carl "Musa" Hixson, asks visitors to think about what they would like to see grow in Brooklyn, write their thoughts on a piece of paper and then place it in one of three human-sized structures that Musa call seeds. When the exhibition closes, Musa plans on planting one of those seeds in the ground as "a spiritual investment in what we would like to see more of in our community," he said.

Musa views the piece and the exhibition as a chance to move beyond simply complaining about gentrification to inciting change. "In this work, I am being proactive and saying, 'OK, we've discussed a lot of what we don't want and a lot of direction that is taking we don't want to see, but let's make an investment in what we do want to see,'" he said.

A Dual Role

Many of the artists in the exhibition have experienced gentrification both as artists and as members of the community and their art reflects that dual role.

"We complain about it as working class people and have our fears, but we haven't organized," explains DuVerney. "And then as artists, most of us have some sort of awareness of the role we play in it whether we are in denial of it or not. I wanted to address that issue of indifference -- of knowing what's going on and having some awareness of it, but remaining indifferent."

As people with a keen eye for what surrounds them, artists may experience the changes in a particularly acute way. Caesar described her feelings of loss when "an old mom and pop store that I not only photographed, but that I would frequent" is no longer there. "Now it is some sort of corporate entity or fly by night thing," she said. "That's the impact it has on me as a person and an artist."

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And yet, while many artists are the gentrifiers, more often than not, they are also the victims. Developers and realtors use the artistic community as a marketing hook to entice people willing to pay higher rents to a neighborhood, and then the artists soon find themselves displaced.

"I wouldn't say that artists are unwitting accomplices or that they are being used and manipulated," Wimberly said. "They are a part of it, clearly. But no more or less than we're all complicit in it. Once you pay more than a \$1 for an apple, you're complicit in it. That's reality."

Nicole Gates Anderson is a freelance writer based in Brooklyn.