

NOW FOCUS Window pains, but art gains

Shuttered store holds a 'Borderland' that brings new works to the public

By Jacob E. Osterhout
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Just as one man's trash is another's treasure, one New Yorker's empty storefront is another's gallery space.

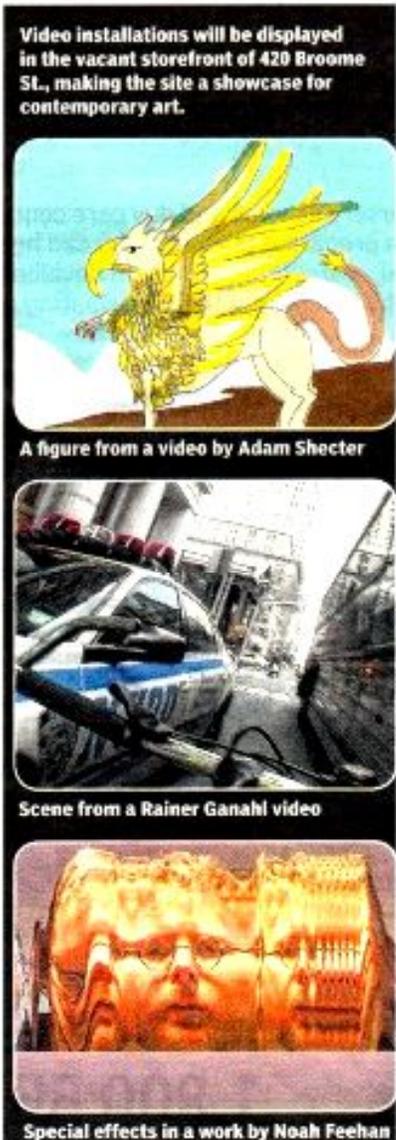
Today's example: "Borderland," a new art exhibit in the window of what used to be a copy shop at 420 Broome St., between Lafayette and Crosby Sts. In Manhattan.



The installation, featuring video art visible to all passerby, is the result of a collaboration between independent curator Andrea Hill and Smart Spaces, an organization that "reimagines vacant urban spaces as places to present contemporary art."

"Borderland" seeks to recognize the ideals behind cable-access shows: the ones you find on cable channels at three in the morning, by airing the videos by six artists.

"I thought cable access, which is a dying art form due to on-demand television, was the perfect premise on which to build this show," says Hill, a 29-year-old Battery Park resident. "One of the first ways information got out about cable access shows were public viewings in the lobbies of buildings and storefronts and barbershops. This is a way of honoring the way we used to get together as a community and watch television."



In the past, Hill has curated exhibits in spaces including a 70-acre working farm, but she has never shown work in a storefront before.

“I’m interested in a different kind of engagement with the public,” she says, emphasizing that viewers can text a telephone number to access an audio guide. “I really like that we are having a public viewing going on 24 hours a day. You don’t have to wrap your head around a press release or walk into a traditional gallery space to appreciate this art.”

The installation, Smart Space’s seventh in 2 ½ years, wasn’t easy to pull off. Originally set to take place in Chinatown, the exhibition had to change in both location and theme due to difficulties securing a storefront.

“The real estate market in Chinatown is very tough to break into,” says Ellen Scott, executive director of Smart Spaces. “Initially, we received a grant for a project in Chinatown with a theme of influx, but we couldn’t find a space.

“In a lot of cases, it was hard to actually figure out who the owners were. Sometimes, language was a barrier. Also, we had trouble getting people to understand the public art concept.”

Then the space on Broome St. opened up and a new proposal was generated that took into account the storefront’s unique location, which straddles three neighborhoods.

“It’s a borderland between SoHo, Chinatown and Little Italy,” says Hill. “It’s sort of nowhere and I like the idea of this crossroads being a broadcast place of all kinds of content.”

Funding secured, the Smart Space team, Hill and a few of the presenting artists moved in with Windex, Goo Gone and scrapers.

“Smart building owners understand that this art in their windows makes their space look more attractive to future renters,” says Scott. “We’ve found the currency building owners care about most is cash, but not far behind that is publicity. Many recognize our public-art mission and feel like they are doing a community good.”

Up came the gates protecting the windows and out came the signs and television screens. In 48 hours, an empty, rundown storefront was transformed into a public art project.

“It takes a lot for New Yorkers to stop in the street,” says Hill. “As a New Yorker, I understand that. So we included pieces that are pretty arresting at first sight. Then, if you choose to commit, you can gain even more from the experience.”