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EXHIBITION REVIEW: ENTHRALL & SQUALOR

By Billy Anania, May 23, 2018



City life can be fleeting. Neighborhoods change, venues come and go, people live and die. New Yorkers have long preserved these experiences through photography. A new exhibition at the Living Gallery Outpost showcases everyday life

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in the Lower East Side from the perspectives of four photographers. *Enthrall & Squalor: Photographing Downtown 1977-1987* opened on Sunday, May 20, and will be on display until Thursday, May 24.

Contributing photographers include Alexis Adler, Arlene Gottfried, Meryl Meisler and Ken Schles. The series captures the decadence and decay of New York in transition, as seen through local artists, musicians, friends and lovers. From the late '70s through the '80s, life downtown was relatively affordable. The Lower East Side became a hub of creativity for young people, who could easily develop a following through their creative endeavors.

While much of the exhibition focuses on anonymity, Alexis Adler's photographs of Jean-Michel Basquiat show the intimacy of their shared space on 12th Street in 1979. Still a teenager, the street artist was steadily garnering a reputation around his enigmatic graffiti. Adler and Basquiat were roommates and casual lovers, and this relationship led to sensuous photos of an icon before his breakthrough into fine art.

Arlene Gottfried died in 2017, but her legacy is preserved through portraits of ordinary people in downtrodden neighborhoods. Her "Classroom 1980s" shows four students in an abandoned lot between buildings. Rubble and litter populate their immediate surroundings, while one child sits at a lone desk with pencil in hand. This satirical depiction of schoolchildren reveals a city in disrepair and the ultimate victims of poor infrastructure. Nonetheless, these children seem amused as they direct their lackadaisical gaze toward the photographer.

Punk and disco were two music movements that guided youth culture in the late '70s. Meryl Meisler's photographs from CBGBs and Infinity Disco show the irreverent attitudes of people who frequented these venues, as seen through shots of Patti Smith, the Dead Boys and long-haired dancers in lavish outfits. The style and expression of each subject shows the contrasting nature of two prominent subcultures, which coexisted on the same streets.

Ken Schles takes a slightly different approach for his photo display. Torn pages from his books *Invisible City* and *Night Walk* adorn an entire wall of the gallery, resulting in an expansive collage of monochromatic moments. Fireworks from a rooftop are juxtaposed with blurry dinner parties and street scenes. Between photos are quotes from literary figures like T.S. Eliot and blank pages, which provide brief intervals between snapshots.

Presented without frames, photographs in this exhibition assume the natural grit of their subject matter. Stapled haphazardly against white walls, the display evokes the DIY mentality that guided the punk movement, elevated the status of pop culture figures and lifted the spirits of underprivileged citydwellers. And all of this took place within a singular neighborhood that may someday be unrecognizable.

Enthrall & Squalor is presented in commemoration of Lower East Side History Month. An artist talk and book signing will be held from 7 to 9 p.m. on Wednesday, May 23, with a storytelling and closing reception event from 6 to 9 p.m. the following evening. The gallery is located at 246 E 4th St. For more information, visit <https://www.thelivinggalleryoutpost.com/enthrallandsqualor>.