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Eastward, Ho! Even Art Is Leaving for the Hamptons

With vacation homes becoming full-time residences because of the coronavirus pandemic, New York galleries are opening outposts to be near collectors.



A wave of new galleries on Newtown Lane in East Hampton includes Sotheby's, Skarstedt and Van de Weghe. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

EAST HAMPTON, N.Y. — The art collectors were finally coming out of hiding here recently, albeit quietly and tentatively. The artists were, too.

The lure? All of a sudden, they have a lot more gallery options lining the immaculate streets of this famously upscale summer town, a seemingly unexpected development in the middle of a pandemic.

Since the beginning of June, five major art galleries have opened here: [Pace](#), [Skarstedt](#), [Van de Weghe](#), [Michael Werner](#) and [Sotheby's](#), all arms of New York art powerhouses.

And more are on the way soon, in Montauk (Amalia Dayan and Adam Lindemann's new venture, [South Etna Montauk](#)) and Southampton ([Hauser & Wirth](#)).

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“Selfishly, I’m totally into it,” the artist Rashid Johnson, a Bridgehampton resident, said of the new spaces. “I miss seeing good art.” Mr. Johnson, like every civic-minded person I met, was wearing a mask.

New York’s top dealers, artists and collectors have long vacationed here. But now that they have been living here during the pandemic, some gallerists are for the first time seeing the Hamptons as “something more than a playground,” the artist Clifford Ross, a longtime area denizen, said.

I drove out for the day to check out the newly burgeoning scene. When I stopped by Rental Gallery, on Newtown Lane, which has been open for three years, I ran into Mr. Johnson, a close friend of Rental’s owner, Joel Mesler, his neighbor in Bridgehampton. In the front of the gallery, part of a July group show called “Friend of Ours,” hangs an untitled, blood-red drawing of Mr. Johnson’s born of pandemic anxiety.

Mr. Johnson wasn’t thrilled with the framing (too thick, he said), and as we were talking, he was recognized by two collectors, Erica Seidel and Tom Deighton, who are engaged.



Per Skarstedt, right, in the new Skarstedt East Hampton gallery space, which features, from left, Willem de Kooning’s “Untitled VII” (1986); Richard Prince’s “3 Jokes Painted To Death or 3 Jokes Really Painted” (1987); and Eric Fischl’s painting, “Like Explaining the End of the World to a Dog” (2020). The Willem de Kooning Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Eric Fischl/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Karsten Moran for The New York Times

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“We own one of your pieces,” Mr. Deighton, a real estate developer, said to Mr. Johnson, referring to a mixed media work.



Rashid Johnson’s oil on cotton rag work “Untitled Anxious Red Drawing” (2020) hangs near the entrance to Rental Gallery. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Mr. Deighton seemed energized to run into an artist whose work he collects. “A big part of what we do is not investing in art, but getting to know the artists and riding the wave with them,” he said. A wave seemed like a good seaside metaphor for the sudden cresting of galleries here.

Mr. Deighton and Ms. Seidel had just been to Pace’s new branch, which had opened that very day, to see the current show, of works by Yoshitomo Nara, another artist they admire.

To them, more gallery options were an unalloyed good, though Mr. Deighton added that he hoped they would give a spotlight to emerging artists and not just famous names.

Traffic was getting bad as the Fourth of July approached, but I braved Montauk Highway to visit veteran collector Leonard Riggio, the founder of Barnes & Noble, who keeps a museum-worthy trove of outdoor sculptures at his estate, starting with a massive Richard Serra work on his front lawn.

Given that outdoor chats are preferred these days, we went out to his back patio and sat under an umbrella as it started to drizzle. He noted that though his collecting has slowed a bit, he was still buying, and he had unsuccessfully bid on a Donald Judd work the week before in a Sotheby’s sale.

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“You could say they’re following one another,” said Mr. Riggio of the eastward gallery movement. “But perhaps better to say they have common wisdom.”

The development is a “big benefit” for him and his fellow collectors, said Mr. Riggio, a long-time friend and client of the Glimcher family, the owners of Pace. (He said he planned to check out the new branch soon.)

I stopped by Pace — where only 10 people are allowed in the gallery at a time and masks are required — to talk to Marc Glimcher, who was seated in the V.I.P. area at the back of his new space, which used to be Vered Gallery. Behind him was an Agnes Martin painting, and in front of him was a glowing James Turrell work. There was a small Alexander Calder sculpture in a crate, too.

Mr. Glimcher had Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, in March and has since recovered. “This gallery came out of our being sick,” Mr. Glimcher said, noting that his wife, Fairfax Dorn, who also had Covid-19, told him, “When we get better, we should open out here.” East Hampton is now the seventh city in which Pace has a branch.

Online exhibitions don’t quite cut it, Mr. Glimcher said, and being surrounded by affluent collectors in the Hamptons is helpful for a gallery in that it nurtures relationships.

“Our fuel comes from people being in front of art,” he said.

Mr. Glimcher’s father, the Pace founder Arne Glimcher, has been coming to the area since the 1970s. “The big change is that the spaces out here weren’t run by the big New York galleries,” he said. “It was more local.” And that closer-to-home focus included the artists that were shown. He added: “Coming to East Hampton was not about doing business. It was to get away from the gallery. It’s ironic that we have a gallery now.”

He chuckled, adding, “But the collectors are here, and the work has to be seen.”

Another veteran, Helen A. Harrison, the director of Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center here, said the international vibe of the new entries was “unusual” for the area; the only comparison she could think of was before her time, the legendary 1957-60 Signa Gallery, a pioneering showcase for modern art, founded by the collector and artist Alfonso Ossorio with John Little and Elizabeth Parker, two other artists who had settled in East Hampton. It featured Abstract Expressionist masters like Robert Motherwell and Jackson Pollock but faded with the coming of Pop Art.

And incursions from Manhattan have not always gelled. Ms. Harrison recalled that in 1981, a high-profile collaboration from dealers Leo Castelli, Marian Goodman and Holly Solomon was launched in East Hampton to great fanfare.

“It failed,” Ms. Harrison said. “People didn’t open their wallets. They were showing the same people as in Manhattan, but people went back there to do the buying.”

Failure is relative, of course — at the high-flying level of Castelli, the Glimchers and others, an extra gallery can be a pleasant experiment that doesn’t make or break their business.

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Pace's lease is only until October, but other dealers in the new crowd have been more ready to commit for the long haul.

Both Christophe Van de Weghe and Per Skarstedt — whose galleries, along with a Sotheby's space offering art, jewelry and watches, are all lined up near each other along Newtown Lane — have signed three-year leases.

Mr. Skarstedt, who has been living nearby for four months, said opening a branch was “definitely a pandemic decision.”

He added: “A lot of our clients moved out here too. And most people will stay till Labor Day or longer.”

I checked out the blue-chip art he had on display, which now includes a Willem de Kooning painting and works by Eric Fischl, Jeff Koons, Sue Williams and Christopher Wool.

Mr. Skarstedt noted that locals were just becoming aware of the gallery's presence. “We're averaging 20 people a day, more on the weekend,” he said.

He said the visitors had mostly complied with pandemic safety, too, with a notable exception. “Only one guy came in without a mask,” Mr. Skarstedt said. “And he was 85.”



Varnette Honeywood's "Family Time" (1984) in the window at Eric Firestone Gallery in East Hampton. The painter was known for her saturated colors and vivid representations of Black family life in Los Angeles. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

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None of the dealers seemed fazed by a lack of crowds.

Eric Firestone — who has had a prime corner location in East Hampton for 10 years — said: “If it’s a great beach day, people aren’t coming in. And the newcomers will figure that out.”

Mr. Firestone also has gallery in Manhattan, and said he specializes in “postwar American artists, with strong emphasis on people who were missed or slighted, like Joe Overstreet and Mimi Gross.” He currently is showing work in East Hampton by the African-American painter Varnett Patricia Honeywood (1950-2010), whose works celebrating Black life were included in the set decoration for “The Cosby Show.”

What of the new competition for collector eyes and pocketbooks? Mr. Mesler of Rental Gallery said he welcomed the big gallery branches, given that all the dealers have different specialties. “The water’s warm,” he said, by way of invitation, adding, “I’m shocked it took a pandemic to get them to do this.”

Restlessness was the driver for Gordon VeneKlasen, the co-owner of Michael Werner Gallery, who has a house in Springs.

“I can’t take it anymore,” Mr. VeneKlasen said. “I need to see art. There was a space available and I said, ‘Great’ and I got the key.” The first show, “Sigmar Polke, Francis Picabia and Friends,” opened on Friday.

When I drove to Southampton to see Hauser & Wirth’s new space, slated to open at the end of July, I was met by Marc Payot, the gallery’s president. At two floors and 5,000 square feet, it’s among the largest of the new galleries.

“This was a no-brainer,” Mr. Payot said of the gallery’s yearlong lease, in a space sandwiched between home décor and cheese shops.

Mr. Payot, who has a home locally, was thinking about what to hang in the front window, and he was considering an LED piece. “I’m thinking of hanging a Jenny Holzer so you can see it at night,” he said.

Given the spate of galleries arriving, it could serve as an “open for business” sign for the Hamptons at large.