



Co-owners Cass Zielinski and Ron Brandon outside their new East Chelsea gallery, Merge.

Moving on up — to the east side

Small gallery with a grand mission mocks conformity

By David Kennerley

With over 330 galleries and counting, West Chelsea has become the nexus of the contemporary art market in New York, if not the world. The Soho giants and the Williamsburg hipsters have already relocated or established outposts there, and now the esteemed Whitney is planning a satellite museum at the entrance to the High Line.

But when first-timers Ron Brandon and Cass Zielinski decided to open Merge gallery, they chose East Chelsea. At roughly the size of most bedrooms, it may well be the tiniest exhibition space in all of Chelsea, east or west.

What were they thinking?

“I go to the West Chelsea galleries, and they’re wonderful, but it’s inconvenient,” said Brandon, who lives around the corner from the gallery nestled on 20th Street, just west of Seventh Avenue. “I think the key word is accessibility. It’s Saturday, you’re running errands, you walk by and pop in, spur-of-the-moment.”

According to Brandon, Merge is pretty much Chelsea’s only street-level fine arts gallery east of 10th Avenue. Specializing in abstract contemporary works, Brandon feels their offerings complement the various modern home furnishings stores in East Chelsea and the nearby Flatiron district.

And despite the gallery’s actual square footage, the soaring ceiling and glass storefront make the space feels bigger, beckoning unsuspecting pedestrians to come in.

Since opening in October 2006 with “Falling Forward,” an exhibition of James Sheehan’s wildly playful, abstract cityscapes and figures, the entrepreneurs have been delighted with the response.

“When people come in for the first time, they are amazed with the space,” says Zielinski, who runs the day-to-day operations. “The small size is actually an asset. Because of the intimacy, customers feel they can approach me to ask about the artist without getting a sales pitch. In larger galleries, people are intimidated.”

If location is key to their all-access mission, so is affordability. Merge appeals the collector who is just starting out, pricing each piece below \$5,000, and often much less.

Zielinski, an artist who’s worked in glass sculpture, has experience working with gallery owners, and has a knack for the process.

“It’s not easy to make it as an artist in New York,” he explained. “You’re lucky if you get a chance to show a curator your portfolio. Our vision is to showcase up-and-coming artists who might not otherwise get a break. We don’t just hang a piece or two, we give them a solo show.”

Brandon, a collector himself, feels the accessibility extends to content as well. “We try to get artists with aesthetics in line with our own. I am not interested in showing dried cow dung slapped on a canvas. I want something that is beautiful, that I can readily understand.”

This week, Merge opens its second show, titled “Wash. Rinse. Repeat.,” featuring mixed media on canvas by the New York painter, Laura Joy Lustig. With her moody, textured abstractions, it’s easy to see how she started off her career as a poet. (“Creating art is translating subjective unconscious onto physical planes,” she says.)

Having lived on the eastern edge of Chelsea for a decade, Brandon reveals another reason why they bucked the West Chelsea bandwagon.

“I know it sounds clichéd, but it really comes from my heart,” he admitted. “I live here. I take my dry cleaning next door. I go to that deli. I eat at that restaurant on the corner. In an area with too many banks, drug stores, and nail salons, I wanted to make a distinctive addition.”

Merge Gallery is at 205 West 20th Street, 212.929.7505, mergegallery.com. “Wash. Rinse. Repeat.” Continues through Jan. 23.