

Visitors at Chelsea Galleries Encounter Cool Vibes, in More Ways Than One

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By: ANN FARMER

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Nicola Barbieri figures that during his monthlong visit to New York, he has stopped into about 60 galleries in Chelsea. And not once did he get even a hello from any of the workers at the reception desks.

“They are a little cold,” said Mr. Barbieri, 36, a musician in Italy, where he is accustomed to friendly banter with gallery workers.

His girlfriend, Amie Weiss, 31, who moved from New York to live with him in Italy, agreed.

“To me,” she said, “it is not always the most welcome atmosphere. It can feel austere. It can feel like an elite place.”

Chelsea, long known for its arts scene, has essentially been whitewashed of its once-greasy persona of garages, auto repair shops and warehouses. Now it is filled with sleek storefronts, luxury condominiums and expensive places to eat and drink.

But visits to numerous galleries and interviews with over a dozen visitors suggest that an air of exclusivity has seeped into the world of galleries, and not just at the high-end ones, which have always exuded a certain air of elitism. Even lesser-known galleries, like those requiring a creaky elevator ride or a lung-burning stairway clamber, can project a distinct feeling of snobbishness.



Douglas Heller, owner of the Heller Gallery, acknowledged the aloofness of staff in Chelsea galleries. He said outside New York, staff members are more friendly to gallery visitors.
Credit Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

New Yorkers who regularly troll the galleries are accustomed to the reserved vibe. But for many art lovers, especially infrequent or first-time visitors, the frosty reception can come as a jolt.

“Many Americans find it quite intimidating and off-putting,” said Douglas Heller, the owner of Heller Gallery, which highlights glass art at its 10th Avenue location. At galleries he has visited outside New York, Mr. Heller said, “visitors are greeted with open arms and engaged immediately with the hope of doing business.”

For his part, Mr. Heller chooses to remain visibly on-hand to educate gallery-goers on what they are seeing. Like most owners, he sells only a small percentage of art to people who walk in off the street. But he keeps price lists handy. At other galleries, the staff is not always eager to discuss numbers, the belief seeming to be: “If you have to ask, you probably can’t afford it.”

Even the look of many galleries, with their glass, brick and steel exteriors, can seem a bit daunting. The subtle signage is often difficult to find. And the first hurdle is stepping through often frosted-glass doors not knowing what lies beyond.

“I know some people say it’s a cold environment,” said Maggie Merrell, 23, a recent Cornell University graduate who once worked in a Chelsea gallery and was exploring the neighborhood on a recent day. “I was scared the first time I walked into a gallery.”

Just inside these pristine white spaces, visitors are likely to encounter a reception area defined by a chest-high counter, beyond which gallery associates or interns are stationed at desks.

These desk sentries (sometimes referred to as gallerinas for their polished appearances) many times do not pause from whatever they are doing to look up. When they do glance over, it is often done with the barest flicker of acknowledgment. If a visitor walks up with a question, as one did at several establishments recently, they still might not raise their heads unless spoken to first.

Ms. Merrell, however, insisted that the workers are not intentionally being aloof. Engaging with every visitor, she said, would make it impossible for them to get their other work done.

But for Roberta Bonisson, who operates the Shed Space, a performance and gallery space in Park Slope, Brooklyn, that is characterized by its hospitable air, the blasé anonymity of these entryways and desk sitters feels disconcerting. “It feels like you are not there,” she said.

Nelly Weidenfelb, a teacher from Israel who spent a morning touring almost a dozen Chelsea galleries with her husband, said only once did any of the reception workers address her — after she first greeted them. “But they answered,” she laughed.

Bruce Silverstein, who opened Bruce Silverstein Gallery in Chelsea 14 years ago, is intimately aware of this perception. “I do have distinct memories,” he said, “of walking into galleries when I was younger and feeling alienated and judged based on my personal appearance at the time and age.” He instructs his gallery associates to be friendly and accommodating, he says, “but we do not want to impose on or inhibit their viewing experience.”

Joseph Kraeutler, an owner of Hasted Kraeutler, where an exhibition by an emerging artist, Awol Erizku, was on display, came out of his office in an eye-catching blue-and-white striped jacket, to say something similar: “It can be a big turnoff if you come in and everyone swarms you. We don’t harass. But people come in and take a look. And if they have questions, we can discuss later.”

Besides, many people do not mind the rarefied air in Chelsea. “It’s quiet and very much about the work,” said Kristine Trevino, a 44-year-old New York stylist, who had made a special outing to Pace Gallery to see a soon-to-close exhibit.

Some even prefer feeling invisible. “It gives me the space to enjoy the work,” said Amy Scarola, a freelance art educator who had just been reveling in an exhibit of abstract expressionist paintings by the artist Joan Mitchell. The vivid collection, inspired by tree forms, was being shown at Cheim & Read, where, again, no one said anything when a visitor walked in. But a bench was thoughtfully placed for visitors to sit down and linger with the artwork for as long as they liked.

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