

open

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open HOUSE



WORKING IN BROOKLYN

Brooklyn Museum

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INTRODUCTION: WORKING IN BROOKLYN Charlotta Kotik and Tumelo Mosaka

The exhibition *Open House. Working in Brooklyn* has a singular place in the history of the Brooklyn Museum. Not simply an exhibition in the accustomed sense of the word, this project is also an event, a celebration of the arts in Brooklyn. It pays tribute to the vitality and potential of the contemporary art being created here, in the most populous of New York's five boroughs. *Open House* brings together traditional art forms and state-of-the-art digital technologies, encompassing painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, installations, film, and video, in works all created after the year 2000. It presents a generation of artists who shaped the art history of the twentieth century alongside emerging artists of the twenty-first century.

The exhibition is eclectic and open-ended, reflecting the changing dynamics of Brooklyn. It presents as complete a survey of contemporary artistic and cultural expression as we can properly put on view, utilizing both conventional exhibition galleries and unexpected spaces for display. This is an ambitious enterprise, but also a humble one, recognizing all too well that no single exhibition could present a truly complete image of the

artistic creativity at work in this borough. Thus the exhibition is a sampling of varied visions, from artists who converge on Brooklyn from all parts of United States and from around the world, attracted by the positive energy emanating from this place.

What produced this charged atmosphere would be hard to define, but there are certain key factors. One of them is certainly the sense of community and camaraderie here, so rare in the competitive arena of the art world. This can be seen among the artists now working in the various Brooklyn communities of Williamsburg, Greenpoint, Fort Greene, DUMBO, Red Hook, Park Slope, Coney Island, Bushwick, Bedford-Stuyvesant, Clinton Hill, and Cobble Hill. Brooklyn is a borough with an egalitarian tradition. Its working-class neighborhoods, often close to smaller manufacturing districts, are generally hospitable and open to change. A certain synergy developed over the years between recently arrived artists and longtime residents, a phenomenon that is not new. In the 1930s the sculptors David Smith, Dorothy Dehner, and William Zorach and the painters Adolf Gottlieb and Marguerite Zorach, for

example, enjoyed the freewheeling attitude of the borough. They also enjoyed the support of the Brooklyn Museum, which in the 1930s maintained the Gallery for Living Artists, a special exhibition space devoted to the work of those living and working in Brooklyn.

The waning economic fortunes of postwar Brooklyn hampered the further development of an active arts community, and it was not until the onset of a broad revival in the early 1980s that Brooklyn again attracted large numbers of artists working in a variety of media. Today, a surprisingly strong artists' network is part of what brings more artists, especially those at the beginning of their careers.

In addition, the crippling pressure built into the environment of most artistic centers seems somehow less intense here, and this often allows a more open exchange of ideas. There is more of the indefinable quality of "psychological space"; you can find opportunities to withdraw into the privacy of your own thoughts, a great help in the creative process. Yet the proximity to major cultural institutions and galleries offers the artist continuing stimulation.

The flourishing scene we know today benefited from a series of events that made many New York artists more aware of the possibilities offered by working in this area. First were the exhibitions in 1980 and 1981 in the Gowanus Canal Art Yard, a vacant lot in an old Italian neighborhood in Carroll Gardens. Then, in April 1982, the *All Fools Show*, an exhibition with more than two hundred artists, many from the East Village, opened in a 32,000-square-foot loft on Berry Street in Greenpoint. And in the fall of 1983, *Terminal New York*, an exhibition widely credited with increasing the migration of artists to Brooklyn, opened at the Brooklyn Army Terminal in Sunset Park. Although it was announced as a juried show, the large space devoted to that exhibition inspired artists simply to bring their works and install them in an impromptu fashion.

Brooklyn became a place of new possibilities—of liberation from the strictures of the established art circuit, not to mention those of Manhattan real estate—and the art world took notice. Brooklyn was now a destination. Its spirit, strong but tolerant, increasingly fostered the

creative power of artists. Some of them exhibited in smaller, artist-run galleries and alternative spaces. Larger venues and increased exhibition space were needed.

Responding to this need, in 1985 the Brooklyn Museum inaugurated *Working in Brooklyn*, a series of exhibitions presenting works created in the borough. Thus, fifty years later, the tradition of the Gallery for Living Artists was renewed and the Museum once again became an important focus of support for the local artistic community. Since then, numerous exhibitions of Brooklyn artists have continued to take place here, with *Open House* being the largest and most ambitious among them.

Research for *Open House* began with the artist files compiled by the Department of Contemporary Art over the years. Portfolios of candidates were assembled, and artists were contacted and asked to submit materials related to their recent work. Cultural institutions and civic organizations in Brooklyn and galleries representing Brooklyn artists were invited to nominate appropriate artists. Our intent was to reach

out to as many groups in the area as possible and enlist their help in identifying artists, not necessarily in the mainstream, who are considered to be vital creative forces in their respective communities. Our efforts were supported by community representatives and art professionals intimately familiar with their neighborhoods.

No other criterion was imposed on the candidates beyond the fact that the artists had to be working in Brooklyn. This principle allowed the nominators to propose those working in a number of different media, including forms of expression that are, strictly speaking, outside the visual arts. And it gave us an opportunity to look beyond the better-known districts like Williamsburg and DUMBO to a variety of other neighborhoods.

The response to our call was overwhelming, and submissions poured in. The sheer volume of artists' names submitted made the decision-making process a major challenge. Submissions were reviewed on a rolling basis, several times a week. Countless gallery and studio visits followed.

As we were making our hundreds of studio visits and looking at

the thousands of slides submitted, certain recurrent themes among the works of art became apparent. A number of the artists also articulated these themes as we looked at their works together. Many artists, we realized, were addressing similar social or political conditions, often on a worldwide scale. And these recurring ideas became ways of interpreting a large array of individual works.

Even though the initial premise for consideration was simply that the artist be working in Brooklyn, it became clear that Brooklyn had become an international hub for artists, and a cosmopolitan vantage point for viewing the world at large. The works in the exhibition therefore do not represent a “Brooklyn sensibility” but instead reflect the diversity and complexity of what must be considered a global community.

Open House presents a plurality of visions, often based, for example, on experiences of fragmentation or on the predicaments of diaspora. So even though certain broad themes may to some extent appear and reappear among various artists, their application nonetheless produces artworks that are radically dissimilar. How could it be otherwise? The

differences reflect the diverse ideas and wide-ranging influences of the artists—which are not by any means limited to the European heritage but rather draw on the international complex of cultural histories that are brought together and mix in this unique geographical location.

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Among the many thematic ideas presented is the concept of the “Fable.” Using imagery of a kind associated with childhood memories, artists can construct a fable that rearranges the elements of everyday reality or re-imagines the social landscape. Thus fantasy becomes a formal critique of the existing situation.

Another common theme might be called “The Quest for Identity,” whether of gender, ethnicity, nationality, or sexuality. These works are often about overturning the rigid strictures of society and liberating oneself from narrowly defined categories or stereotypes. Artists treating such themes have employed a variety of media, from video to works on paper, in keeping with the many facets of identity.

Attempting to escape from the prison of stereotypes can be frightening. This stressful situation gives rise to the dual theme that might be called "Fear and Desire." That is, we desire change yet also fear it. These conflicting emotions charge many of the artworks with contradiction, and can lead to the portrayal of extreme situations.

Other themes explored in the exhibition include the notion of "Domesticity." In the course of recording their own living or working environment, artists transform their personal experience into a larger portrait of humanity. At the same time, artists examine how the mass media shape the environment we live in. In such works, there is an element of tension between the world we create ourselves and the world that others create for us.

For some of the artists, the manipulation or transformation of objects through electronic technology has become the primary means of expression. Their works suggest the theme of "Digital Metamorphosis." Such projects pursue new technologies based on computing, robotics, and advanced engineering to create a visual reality that is beyond our direct

experience of the physical object. They challenge our powers of perception, and in some cases require viewers themselves to construct their aesthetic experience by interacting with the technology.

Other works included here emulate forms of architecture. They suggest the theme of a "Structured Environment." These installations combine the distinct disciplines of architecture, sculpture, and design. Many of them offer viewers a different perception, or feeling, of space through a reinterpretation of their built surroundings.

Throughout the exhibition, a number of works explicitly refer to various aspects of traditional American landscape painting, with the Brooklyn Museum's renowned collection itself a frequent source of inspiration. These works, alluding to a major genre in the history of American painting, pay homage to "Nature and Landscape." Here we encounter a gamut of formal approaches, ranging from strictly representational or naturalistic to highly abstracted or idealized.

The many different strategies employed by the artists in the exhibition reveal the wide scope of artistic production in this place in our time. We have not attempted to categorize or confine individual artists within any of the themes just mentioned, since such divisions are permeable and in constant flux. We believe that these themes, which are really just a sample of the ideas in the air, simply give us some clues about how to approach the works of art before us. They provide a thread through the maze.

Open House bears witness to the artistic diversity prevalent in Brooklyn. It aims to broaden the dialogue about the complexities of artistic production and the many roles that art plays in society at the present time. The exhibition, in the end, puts on view as many divergences as it does commonalities. It celebrates a world of difference.

This exhibition does not aspire to present the complete universe of contemporary art existing in Brooklyn, nor could it. Instead, it merely points to certain developments that may enable viewers to select what best corresponds to their own sensibilities. The richness and diversity

exemplified by the works exhibited here continue beyond the walls of the Museum, in the studios of those artists whose work could not be included, owing to space limitations. We hope that the curiosity aroused by the exhibition's broad range will encourage the public to seek out creative expressions by all the artists working in Brooklyn.



PATRICIA CRONIN *Memorial to a Marriage*, 2001–2, cast 2004
Bronze, 17 x 53 x 27 in. (43 x 134.6 x 69 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects, New York