



# Art on the Outskirts

## REFLECTIONS ON A NEIGHBORHOOD IN TRANSITION

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There is a common misconception that artists pioneer neighborhoods prior to gentrification, but this term neglects communities that existed there all along. Artists in Jersey City have a long history of enmeshing themselves within their neighborhoods, making no attempt to change or reject anyone based on their identity or means. Outside of the Powerhouse Arts District, local artists thrive in their creative spaces without overspending on rent or a mortgage. After all, the life of an artist can, at times, be financially turbulent.

Bergen-Lafayette and Bergen Hill are neighborhoods full of industrial history, and their current redevelopment attests to shifting cultural paradigms in New Jersey's cities. Many artists realized the potential of these areas much earlier, yet they made no effort to disrupt or alter the social environment. An unassuming existence off the beaten path can be rewarding for painters, sculptors, and gallerists seeking a platform on which to base their careers. Such is the case with independent artists Agnes de Bethune and Thomas O'Flynn, as well as Deep Space Gallery owners Keith VanPelt and Jenna Geiger. Their experiences show sides of these neighborhoods that new investors and residents may never see, from a time when Jersey City was still under the radar.

Originally from California, Agnes and Tom first moved to New York in the early 1980s. After a few years living

in downtown Manhattan, they crossed the Hudson River and purchased their home on Halladay Street in 1985.

"Our rent was going up in Chinatown after we got married, and we were looking for a house with a studio and *space*," Tom emphasizes that last word deliberately. "I think it took us about a year. We had gone to a party with some people in Jersey City, and they drove us around the area. Everyone was excited because they were moving and building houses. Plus it was cheap, like buying a car. So people were leaving New York, coming here, and buying property."

Their home was built and decorated with the memories that preceded it. That is, aspects of Bergen-Lafayette culture were woven and built into its very foundation and structure. The first floor of the artists' two-home building was once a rollicking dive bar, known for cheap booze and frequent drunken fistfights. Pieces of this bar, long since closed, were repurposed to construct the dining room furniture and cabinets upstairs.

Their kitchen looks out on a garden in their backyard, with the house's foundation still visible in the area where they now grow lettuce. Before cars and indoor plumbing, this same yard contained stables and outhouses. The original house was first constructed in the 1880s, and the couple restored it from its decrepit state following the bar's closing. The downstairs area is now their studio

and workshop, while upstairs is their domestic space. Art books, paintings, and collages populate their living room; of particular note are first editions of books from the original incarnation of the International Center of Photography, signed by the photographers.

The space that once housed the bar now hosts Agnes's latest paintings, which isolate household objects, tools, and sporting goods. These bright still lifes use depth to their advantage, offering new perspectives to the viewer through meticulous linework and shading. Agnes walks with a swagger and carries an air of hearty cynicism. She gestures at her diverse paintings indifferently—as if anyone wouldn't want to stop and take a look—while recalling her days of exhibiting at Hammer Galleries and working for renowned industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss.

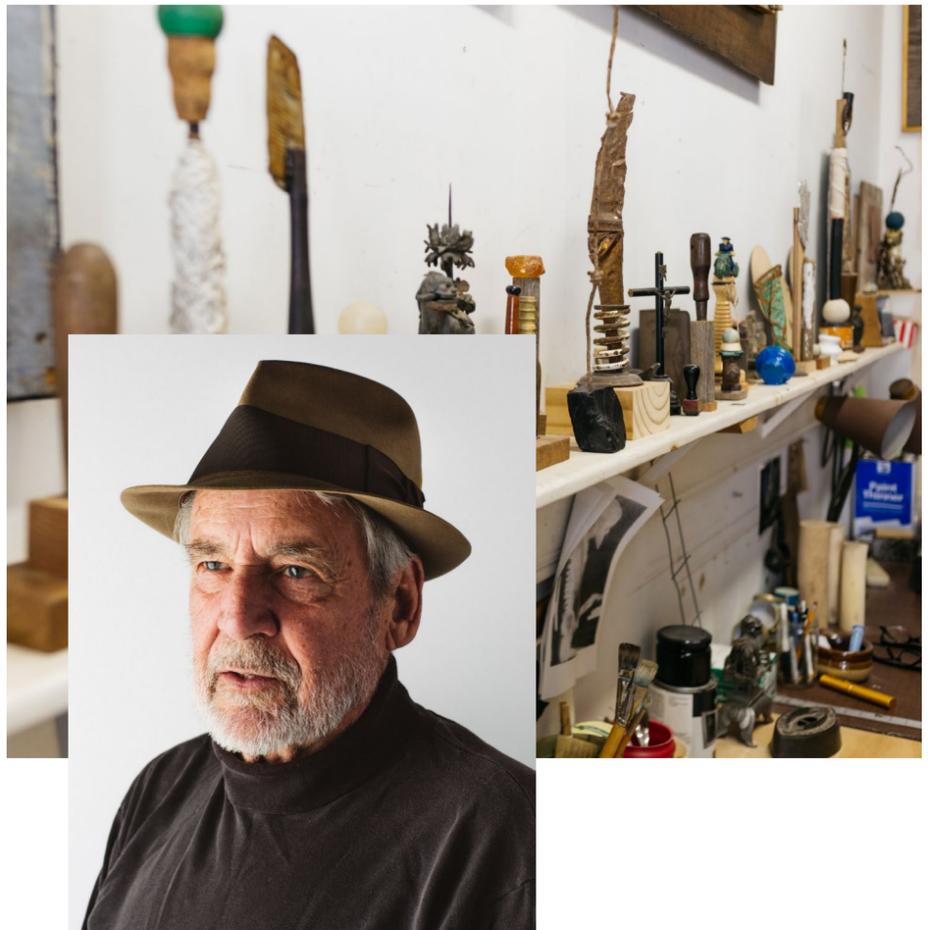
In the next room are Tom's complex works of assemblage, created with found objects mostly from the neighborhood and nearby. Religious iconography, scrap metal, old wood and tree branches, figurines, and grocery cans take on new forms amidst pronounced textures and contrasting color palettes. Found items from throughout Jersey City crowd his creative space, likely as material for future works. A table made out of a small suitcase and painted wooden legs sits below a stool hanging crookedly in midair. Likewise, a glass display case is held up by wooden legs similarly painted, with nothing inside but

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a rusted propane canister. Considering Tom's career as an art handler and mover, these pieces speak to the mindset of a collector enchanted by history and spontaneity.

Bergen-Lafayette carries a local charm despite recent commercial real estate interests. Newer restaurants accompany historic churches, firehouses, and storefronts on centuries-old city streets. The neighborhood really experienced its resurgence, Tom and Agnes claim, with the addition of the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail in 2011. With this development came further mobility for the neighborhood's residents. Bergen-Lafayette is developing faster than anyone could have imagined, mostly because it is now a transit-oriented hub. But many of their close friends have been skeptical about traveling out there. In the '80s, their neighbors were primarily black and Puerto Rican—different cultures that Agnes and Tom always considered family.

"A lot of it has to do with racism," Agnes said. "There's no ifs, ands, or buts about it."



She claims that it wasn't always easy, particularly during the crack epidemic. She and Tom experienced a few random attacks and break-ins, but these minor incidents did not detract from their desire to remain there. Some friends trekked out to the neighborhood over the years, such as famed art dealer Leo Castelli. Agnes and Tom emphasized that he made the effort, took the PATH, and came over regardless of the rumors.

Agnes and Tom are very much into banter, but they also express a mutual respect. Their resilience reflects the lived experience in southwest Jersey City. While they spent much of their careers involved with New York galleries and museums, they immersed themselves in the local culture through its many phases and displayed their work at the Jersey City Museum until it closed in 2010. This was a major loss, they claim, and it affected how they now interact with their local arts culture, which to them is changing to a point of non-recognition. Their expertise on the area sheds light on how outside interests inspire infrastructural change, and how the community they once knew has transformed as a result. What first began as an underground arts scene is now becoming more institutionalized as new demographics move into the city and commercial real estate expands.

This is not to say there was no intermediary period, or that independent galleries do not still thrive in the area. Rather, the expansion of Jersey City's arts culture—from independent artists and galleries to street art and public murals—follows a linear narrative from obscurity to popularity. Artists who have lived here for more than a decade attest to the sparse nature of the downtown area before its rapid development. Long-gone galleries

near Exchange Place and Grove Street once hosted regular exhibition openings, while the aforementioned Jersey City Museum took local art into its public collections.

One of the major symbols of city-wide change was the demolition of 111 1st Street, which at one time housed up to 400 creative people, artists and artisans of every stripe who lived and worked in that iconic building from the mid-1980s until 2007. Afterwards, affordable art space was guaranteed at 150 Bay Street, but some building owners balked at their offerings. Because hallways with hanging pictures and bathrooms with murals technically qualify as gallery spaces, the discussion for further improvements is now dormant. Since that time, the arts scene has dissipated through the outer neighborhoods. Many former residents of 111 still work within the art spaces, but they are more independent than previously. Nonetheless, the galleries of southwest Jersey City offer their eclectic sensibilities to a neighborhood undergoing rapid change. What they present to newer residents and businesses may well define the future of local culture.

One of these flagship businesses is Deep Space Gallery on Cornelison Avenue. Walking into the expansive building would give one the impression that they were in the heart of a bustling artists' neighborhood. The walls of its main gallery are adorned with contemporary expressionist art by burgeoning painters and designers, arranged meticulously to maximize the space. Its aesthetic suits affluent and up-and-coming neighborhoods in Brooklyn or Los Angeles, but this two-floor creative space sits tucked away in Bergen Hill, just north of Bergen-Lafayette. And make no mistake, the business is independently owned and operated, devoid of any investors or industry moguls.

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The owners of the gallery, Keith and Jenna, maintain a local vibe with their exhibitions and events while promoting their artworks on Artsy and other professional platforms. And their business isn't only in art; they also sell vintage clothing and records on the first floor of their building. Their first experiences in Jersey City date back to 2000, when there were few people living downtown. Artist friends had huge warehouses and studio spaces at that time. Within a few years, the pair would relocate permanently and develop a circle of street artist friends, many of whom still live in the area today.

“There's definitely way more embracing of street art than before,” Keith says. “Everybody's okay with murals now. That was not the case even five years ago, when the citywide mural project first started.”

Deep Space hosts a few group exhibitions per year, using many of the same artists while garnering an ever-expanding roster. One of their most recent exhibitions, Love Triangle//For the Love of Geometry, opened in late June and featured works from eighteen contemporary artists. The gallery frequently exhibits work by native Jersey City artists like Clarence Rich, who displayed his work there recently in his third solo exhibition, Maelstrom.

From the Deep Space rooftop, one can observe the entire recent history of Jersey City. With the Manhattan skyline in the far distance, new skyscrapers around Exchange Place loom in the foreground, surrounded by old houses and abandoned brick buildings. Newer condos populate their neighborhoods, their shining gray towers not yet occupied. To some extent, Deep Space's distance from downtown is appealing. Existence on the fringes of a developing city allows for social and creative freedom, as evidenced by their raucous opening receptions attended by nearby gallerists and fellow artists. But as the downtown arts scene develops more rapidly, the galleries outside of that nexus observe a lag. Much like Agnes and Tom, Keith and

Jenna enjoy the distance from downtown but hope that they can benefit from the rejuvenation of their neighborhood.

“I don't think our experience in Jersey City is much different from a lot of cities that are in a growth spurt, in which a lot of local artists feel left out of the growth,” Jenna says. “People still need places like art galleries to gather, get to know each other, and establish that community, feeling like it's a home and not just somewhere you live to commute to work from.”

There are, of course, other artists and curators who also operate in the area. Jenna and Keith mention Smush Gallery on Summit Avenue, run by dancer Katelyn Halpern, as well as Pro Arts, an advisory organization that plans gallery shows and performances in different spaces. Over the years, various initiatives have helped bridge the divide between Jersey City's neighborhoods. The Jersey City Art and Studio Tour (JCAST) takes place once a year in October. Anyone with studio space can register and open their doors, no matter the venue. The city arranges a map with coordinates for all volunteering artists, who can then showcase their work in the space where they created it. JCAST is making a concerted effort to get folks out of the downtown area for art events, such as last year's opening gala in Journal Square.

“When we started doing the artist tours,” Tom says, “and they put up the map, we realized that there's a pottery artist and glass artist in this neighborhood. No one realizes we're out here creating otherwise.”

JC Fridays also happens once every season. Unlike the studio tours, these quarterly events are concentrated mostly downtown, so artists outside of that area have trouble getting people to their shows in other neighborhoods.

“I've heard my friends who live downtown refer to something three blocks away as completely out of the question,” Keith laughs.



The vast industrial parks that stretch between downtown and Jersey City's outer neighborhoods are contributing factors here. These swaths of land may be abandoned most of the time, but they nonetheless detract from pedestrian traffic by disconnecting the central hub of shops and restaurants from the at-home studio spaces. With few businesses or recreational spaces to help bridge that divide, newer residents and out-of-towners might not immediately notice the attractions of the city's outer boroughs.

Artists assume neutral identities in urban spaces, often flocking to affordable housing as a result of their tumultuous and near-unsustainable lifestyles. From an artist's standpoint, Bergen-Lafayette and Bergen Hill exhibit the high and low ends of culture. This stands in opposition to the newer, institutionalized arts community. The disparity between commercial and local artists seems more palpable than ever in Jersey City, with luxury condos supplanting apartments and public murals replacing street graffiti. As such, it's more important than ever to amplify the voices of local artists who helped shape the culture. Their stories reveal more about these areas than any realtor ever could. ◀

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