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The Last Artists of SoHo (and TriBeCa)

Downtown Manhattan was the center of the art world in the early '80s, but 15 years on, most of the artists and galleries had left. These are the people who stayed.



A few of the artists who still keep studios downtown. From left: Red Grooms, John Newman, Mary Obering, Betty Tompkins, Neil Jenney, Marilyn Minter, Mary Heilmann, Robert Longo, Michele Oka Doner, Joan Semmel, Jackie Winsor, Laurie Anderson, Richard Nonas, Mel Kendrick, Arlene Shechet. Shot on location on Jersey Street in SoHo on February 23, 2018. Credit Jason Schmidt

In the late 1950s, when artists started moving downtown, the area was a sprawling wasteland of low level buildings anchored by two largely industrial areas — what we now call SoHo and its neighbor immediately to the south, TriBeCa. Both had begun in the 1600s as colonial farmland; by the 19th century, both had transformed into a shopping and entertainment district, with large hotels, upscale department stores, theaters and hundreds of brothels. After the Civil War, the area became an important manufacturing center for textile firms and other industries, and the brothels were gradually replaced by clusters of cast-iron warehouses. By the 1950s, these warehouses were mostly being used for storage or sweatshops, and the neighborhood, increasingly decrepit, earned the nickname Hell's Hundred Acres.

In retrospect, it seems destined that artists would colonize this place — for whom were these cavernous, empty spaces built if not for artists, like Donald Judd playing around with new and unwieldy ideas? — though it's hard to overstate just how difficult it was to do. Living in these buildings, which were not zoned for residential occupation,

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was illegal, and the conditions were bleak: In some cases there was no working plumbing, water, heat or electricity. Artists were required by the city to post warning signs on the exteriors of these buildings that read A.I.R. — Artist in Residence — so that if there were a fire, the fire department would know to rescue them.

"It was almost like being in the country in the middle of the city," says Richard Nonas, who moved to SoHo in the late '60s and to TriBeCa around 1975. He is among a small group of artists who remain in this part of the city, some of whom T gathered for a photo shoot in the area in February. "It was only toward the '80s," he says, "that I knew anybody who made enough money to hire an architect or a plumber."

Inconveniences and startling imagery aside — Red Grooms, who's had a studio in TriBeCa since 1969, still recalls the day he found a chalk outline of a dead body in front of the door of his former apartment on Mulberry Street — the area's transformation into an arts district truly began when a young woman named Paula Cooper opened the first major gallery here on Prince Street in 1968. She was followed in 1971 by Leo Castelli — the Upper East Side dealer of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol — and a few other dealers, who opened branches downtown at 420 West Broadway, which became known as the SoHo Gallery Building. By the 1980s, SoHo was once again an important commercial center for the city, host to New York's most influential galleries and the place where many artists lived and worked. (The mainstream art industry of this time often ignored artists of color, with the notable exception of Jean-Michel Basquiat, who was embraced by the SoHo galleries and had a studio nearby on Great Jones Street. Artists like Lorraine O'Grady, David Hammons and Senga Nengudi were left out of the narrative of SoHo's heyday, though they did find a home at Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown gallery, which opened in 1974 on West 57th Street and moved to TriBeCa in 1980.)

"SoHo was like this nirvana that as a young artist I wanted to go to," says Robert Longo, whose first studio in New York was further downtown, near the South Street Seaport, a space he shared in the late '70s with his then-girlfriend, Cindy Sherman. In 1984, he moved his studio to a building on Grand and Centre Streets, which was formerly occupied by a fraternal organization called the Independent Order of Odd Fellows, but by the '80s was mostly full of sweatshops. "420 West Broadway," Longo says, "was like the center of the universe."

For years, the area remained unexpectedly small and quaint. But over the decades, SoHo and TriBeCa changed fundamentally, shaped — and, arguably, destroyed — by the very art world it had borne. As artists started organizing co-ops to buy the buildings, the area became more convenient in some ways (a grocery store, Dean & DeLuca, opened on the corner of Prince and Greene Streets in 1977) but also more commercial and expensive. Artists who bought their studios for a few thousand dollars are now in possession of properties worth millions. Many people cashed out (or were forced out) years ago, and as the neighborhood gentrified, the galleries — including Paula Cooper, who is still in business 50 years later — left for Chelsea, another formerly sprawling wasteland. "You know the image of Athena being born?" Longo asks. "She comes out of Zeus's head fully formed? That was like Chelsea."

As for the neighborhood where he still works after all these years, "now it's just a bunch of stores. There's something very sad about it. SoHo's really become a shopping mall." But the impact of the neighborhood has been etched into the collective memory of New York's history and is still one of the reasons that, year after year — decades after the people who made downtown have disappeared — artists come to Manhattan, in pursuit of their own SoHo story. And if they know where to look, they might even see one of the people who made their dream possible: an artist, downtown, in New York City.

—M.H. Miller