

By Artists For Artists

By Karin Lipson

ALL KEN BERNSTEIN really wanted, at first, was a low-rent studio where he could paint. But opportunities have a way of cropping up unexpectedly in Long Island City, and what Bernstein wound up with was Studio K, the first art gallery in this gritty factory neighborhood in Queens.

Since March, when he opened his storefront gallery between a Spanish bodega and a news-delivery service, Bernstein has devoted much of his limited space to a number of local artists. Now, however, Studio K has mounted a larger survey show of 15 artists who work in Long Island City and are part of its continuing growth as an arts center.

There are a couple of big names here — notably, Mark Di Suvero and Isamu Noguchi — some recognized artists such as Roy Gussow and Mattie Berhang, and others who might still be described as “emerging.” It’s the sort of show, and the sort of gallery, says Bernstein, that he could only have in Long Island City, a place as casual and rough-edged as SoHo was years ago.

“I got this space to use as a studio,” he says. “But I saw a lot of good artists here, and I saw the potential for a gallery. The relatively low rents made it possible to start one. Here I can take more risks and take the time to establish myself.”

If the current show is any indication, the 28-year-old artist-turned-dealer is using that time well. The largely abstract sculptures, paintings and assemblages on view have been carefully chosen to give a feel for the kind of creative energy that’s harbored these days among the warehouses and factories of the neighborhood.

In two cases, certainly, Bernstein didn’t have to go far for his selections: Thom Cooney Crawford and Tobi Kahn both maintain studios on the same block as Studio K. Forty-one-year-old Cooney Crawford’s painting in the show is a mysterious piece, filled with Eastern meditative symbols and mystical words that float among thick daubs of paint like weightless satellites in space. Set against these shapes and phrases is an equally mysterious figure, placed off-center as though to emphasize its questionable identity.

The 32-year-old Kahn, an increasingly known artist who explores the tenuous border between illusion and reality, is represented by a semiabstract painting of a road trailing off to a horizon. This Munch-like work is a study in browns, greys and blacks; but Kahn has built up his canvas with layers of paint that give it an iridescent, sensual quality despite the muted colors. This shewn and the pared image make the work look as much like four flat planes as like a bleak landscape.

Kari Miller-Glass, a 29-year-old violist and amateur botanist as well as an artist has infused her



Photos by Jennifer Jocklin

Long Island City’s 2 art galleries were both opened recently by artists to display the works of community artists. Kenneth Bernstein, left, owns Studio K, where this Suvero model is on display.

lyrical “Flood Plain” with elements from varied interests. A delicate watercolor on folded rice paper, “Flood Plain” could be a microscopic look at an oil-filled puddle or the wildly active interior of a single cell. It also looks like terrain seen from an airplane. A highly decorative work, it’s saved from excessive prettiness by the painted black arcs and lines — looking like the tautly pulled strings of an instrument — that follow the patterns of the origami folds.

For a healthy antidote to the metaphysics and introspection of these pieces, move on to Bert Kupferman’s caustically funny sculpture, “A Visit to the Hospital.” Here, a small, painted, bronze male figure (with a noticeable incision in it) grasps a spear in one hand while the other holds aloft an object looking suspiciously like kidneys. A rear view of the work reveals the figure as a skeleton.

There’s humor, too, in Leslie Lalehzar’s “Sorted Response,” which pits cut-out paper dolls, paste-up stickers, clownlike figures and riotous streaks of color against one another in an aggressive, energetic collage.

Among the youngest and newest local residents in the show is English-born Nick Walster, 26, a former cruise-ship photographer and self-taught painter. Walster’s whimsical “Erica” is an improbably red-lipped, biomorphic cartoon creature on paper, that seems to have ingested swatches of Paul Klee, Joan Miro and even post-graffiti artist Kenny Scharf. If she’s a derivative creature, she’s nevertheless an engaging one.

Against the sensory onslaught of such works, the pieces by Long Island City veterans Roy Gussow and Mattie Berhang exude a calm assurance. Gussow’s curving, polished steel slabs exemplify cool formality and elegance, while Berhang’s mobile, its pieces of suspended car molding and can tops floating on different levels, has a serenity that belies its scrap-metal origins.

No Long Island City show could hope to call itself representative without examples from Noguchi and Di Suvero. Noguchi’s floor lamp, a 1955 design with a mulberry paper and wood shade, looks like a cocoon. Di Suvero’s welded steel model for a large-scale piece was chosen for display by the artist, possibly with a humorous nod at the name of the gallery; a major element is a strongly diagonal letter K.

Also on view: wall constructions by Rickey Richardson and Chris Daehke; Adele Shtern’s enlarged computer graphic, a high-tech work in a disarmingly childlike style; Dan Sinclair’s large, pyramidal “Stale” and Lucy Fradkin’s three small paper collages, looking a bit like playful miniature floor plans.

The show is on view through Nov. 17; a sequel concentrating on representational art opens Nov. 21. Studio K, 12-15 Jackson Ave., is open Thursday through Sunday, 1-7 p.m.

Studio K was the first gallery in Long Island City, but it’s no longer the only one. The Forefront Gallery, just a five-minute walk away on 21st Street, has opened with a show of two more local artists, Mark Rich and Pat Walsh. About 25 works are on view through Nov. 2 in this one-time cellar converted to its present use by William Arvidson, who, like Studio K’s Bernstein, is an owner-artist.

Both Rich and Walsh work on a large scale, in an expressionistic style. The 26-year-old Rich, concerned with the role of the individual in a depersonalized, high-tech society, fills his huge, dark canvases with the supposedly discarded tools of a low-tech era: gears, nuts, bolts and wrenches crop up repeatedly. His latest canvases show some relief from the heavy metal black and gray backgrounds of so many of these pieces. There are welcome dashes of bright color here and there in works that appear more coherent and unified than their predecessors.

By contrast, Walsh, whose lushly colored work is in the collection of the Prudential Insurance Co. and in private collections, shows here a series of paintings she calls the “wood pieces,” so named for the painted wood framing devices that serve as integral parts of each work. The flat frames effectively balance the density of Walsh’s thick knife and brush strokes, which create vertical sheets of color that virtually pour down the canvas.

The Forefront Gallery, 44-74 21st St., is open Tuesday through Thursday, 10:30 a.m.-1 p.m.; Friday through Sunday, 10:30 a.m.-6 p.m. ■

Leslie Lalehzar’s collage, “Sorted Response,” at Studio K, includes paper dolls, paste-up stickers, clownlike figures.

