

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Finding Art Miles Away From the Expected

Hanne Tierney has made her FiveMyles gallery in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, both a beacon and an anchor for the neighborhood.

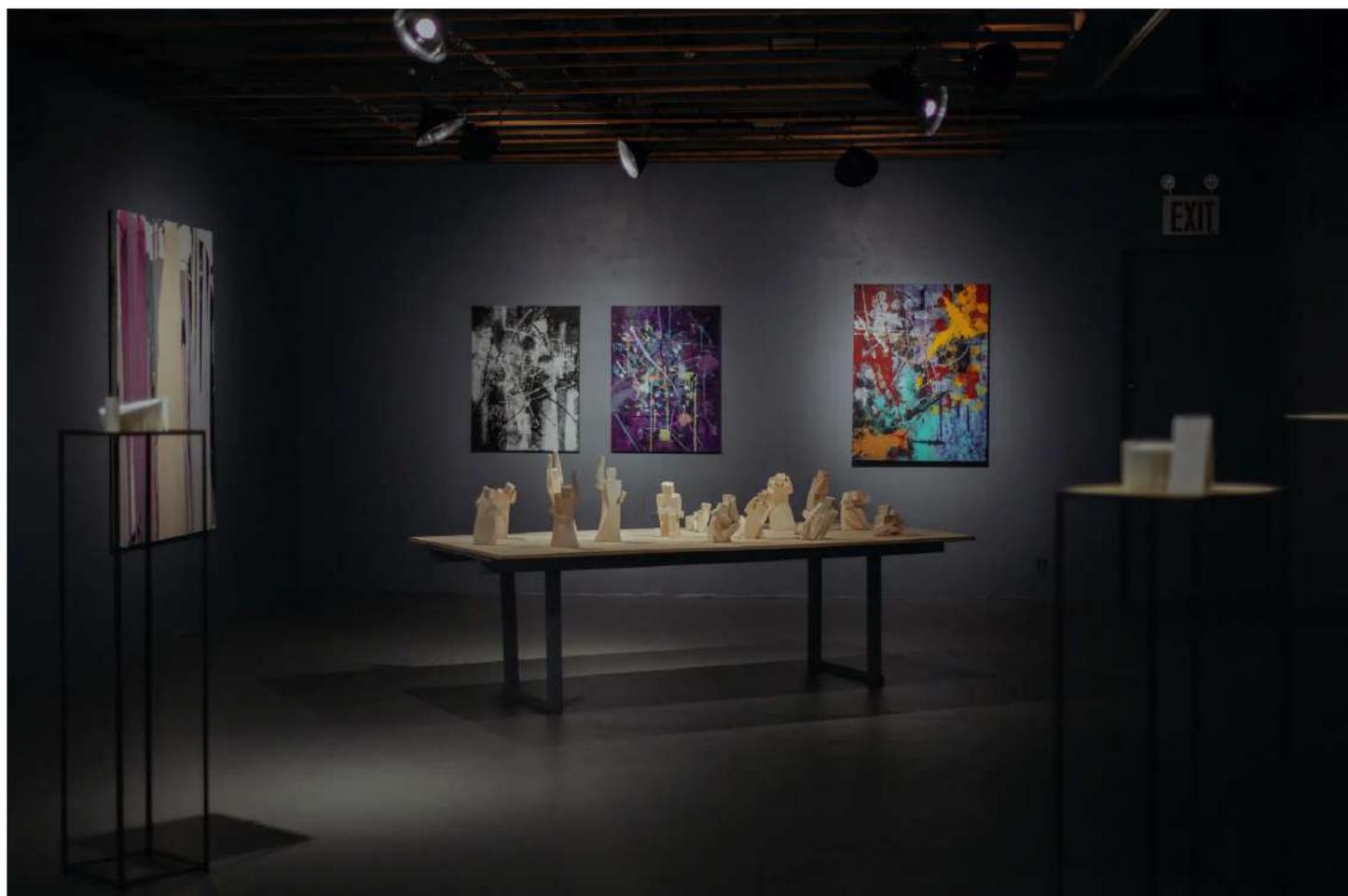
By Seph Rodney

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About four years ago I followed an emailed invitation to an art gallery in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, not entirely expecting to find curious, provocative, contemporary work in that neighborhood, but I did. Now I return regularly to find that art again and again at FiveMyles gallery.

I may not have otherwise come to know Heather Holden, Shervone Neckles, Deborah Singletary, Adama Delphine Fawundu, Franks Deceus and Roya Amigh. I received that solicitation at a time when I was just starting out as a staff writer for Hyperallergic, learning the contours of the New York City art scene. I was drawn to FiveMyles — the oldest still-running gallery in Crown Heights — by images of an exhibition of drawings by Amigh, “In my sleep I migrate back,” in 2017. I witnessed combinations of glued sheets of lace, dried flowers, cardboard, and translucent, handmade paper interspersed with pieces of thread glued onto these substrates to form words and human figures. It was a revelation to see these materials that might make up a teenager’s keepsake journal placed in intuitive combinations that told stories which were fragmentary and intimate, yet also evocative of the history of the artist’s Persian ancestors. It is not an accident that this type of work is shown here.

The gallery director, Hanne Tierney, is herself a puppeteer and a performer who makes work that conveys narratives through a combination of installation, lighting, music and her choreographed movement of anthropomorphized costumes and objects — what Tierney describes as “a theater without actors.” It is also no coincidence that the majority of shows I have seen at FiveMyles consist of the work of middle-aged women and women of color. As Tierney tells me: “There is so much soul and heart in the women’s shows in a different way.”



“Four Artists: Two Painters, Two Sculptors,” the current show, includes work by Michael Filan, Kathleen Maximin, Gerard McCarthy and Gunnar Theel. It is on view through Saturday. Lila Barth for The New York Times

When I ask her to elaborate on why she shows the particular artists she does, she says: “You know, the people who go to Chelsea, they don’t know there’s another identity that is making art, not like we’ve done it for thousands of years. Since a lot of Black artists do show work at FiveMyles, I’m trying to make these other people come in and see the work they don’t have access to, work that is being done from another identity, from another sense of being, from another sense of importance.”

Tierney’s own identity has been in flux. Originally from East Germany, she arrived in the United States in 1959 at age 19, hired as an au pair. She was hoping to reinvent herself away from a region still riven by war. She became an artist and eventually a gallerist; however, she describes herself to me first as a failed writer: “I realized I wasn’t really good enough like George Eliot and it brought me to like three-dimensional writing, and that brought me eventually to puppetry.”

Tierney first came to the space that would become FiveMyles in 1999, after her mentor and friend, the sculptor Herbert Ferber, purchased it to store his work. Tierney used the unoccupied part to make her own work, also thinking that her son, Myles Tierney, who was then a television producer for The Associated Press, and based in Nairobi, might use the space as an editing suite. Her son, the fifth in a line of men in her family named Myles, was shot and killed in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in January 1999. Thereafter, Tierney named the space FiveMyles and began using it to host performances.



FiveMyles in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, is an exhibition and performance space, and an anchor in a rapidly changing community. Lila Barth for The New York Times

The very next year, Marian Griffiths, a close friend of Tierney’s and the former director of the Sculpture Center, asked Tierney if she could curate a show at FiveMyles. Thus, the artist morphed into a gallerist committed to showing middle-age women and Black artists, who were often ignored by the more upmarket galleries and dealers plying their business a few miles west.

I recall seeing Shervone Neckles’s show “Provenance” in 2019 and then thinking that her use of the figure of a Black woman’s silhouetted body carrying a house atop her shoulders in the place of her head was a profound way to speak of legacy and inheritance as both burden and boon. (That same year Neckles was chosen to represent Grenada at the Venice Biennale.) In 2020 for the show “Between Waters,” I saw Heather Holden’s gorgeously cinematic paintings that mash together images of cataclysmic events with signifiers of pop culture (such as Michael Jackson’s white glove). These women deserve champions to bring them to larger audiences. Hanne Tierney is their advocate.

One might take the No. 2, 3, 4 or 5 trains to the Franklin Avenue-Medgar Evers College stop and walk a few blocks to St. Johns Place. The gallery is between two major avenues of commerce, Classon Avenue and Franklin Avenue, and is a sanctuary between them. Entering FiveMyles is a bit like entering a cave. All the outside noises are turned off; the interior painted in a deep, middle gray gives the space a feeling of being slightly outside the grip of time.



Gunnar Theel, "S.287," a welded steel sculpture at the exhibition "Four Artists: Two Painters, Two Sculptors." Lila Barth for The New York Times





“Indian Summer” by Kathleen Maximin, a mostly self-taught painter from St. Lucia. “There is so much soul and heart in the women’s shows in a different way,” Tierney said. Lila Barth for The New York Times

Though Tierney has had a home in SoHo for the past 50 years, she cultivates the arts community in Crown Heights. In the past few years the local community has changed significantly. According to The Observer, between 2000 and 2015, northern Crown Heights and Prospect Lefferts Gardens have experienced a 205 percent increase in white residents, and a 23 percent decrease in Black residents. At the same time, the number of businesses in Crown Heights increased from about 1,000 to 1,970.

Tierney grieves this change and hopes that her gallery can serve as both an anchor and a beacon for the neighborhood. “It was a very established community where people married each other, had children with each other, and whenever somebody died, there was a memorial service at FiveMyles,” she said. “It was a community that had established itself. Young people in Manhattan want to live cheaply, and start moving in, the landlords see there’s a little extra money to be made because they’re more financially viable, so it just kind of really ruined this community. FiveMyles is kind of like a little rescue station.”

Its annual budget, \$160,000, comes mostly from a mix of grants bestowed by several funding bodies including the New York State Council for the Arts and the Andy Warhol Foundation. Tierney says a majority of it goes to artists and salaries for its small staff of four (including herself), and for installations like the current one, “Four Artists: Two Painters, Two Sculptors.” This show, too, is representative of FiveMyles’ aspirations: It pairs Kathleen Maximin, a mostly self-taught, Black woman painter from St. Lucia, with Michael Filan, an older, white male artist educated at Pratt Institute, who both meet in their earnest investigation of the expressive potential of abstraction. The exhibition contrasts that painterly exuberance with quiet pieces of stoneware that favor human figures by Gerard McCarthy and painted steel by Gunnar Theel that resemble domiciles. All together they give us a picture of a community that Tierney says she wants to nurture: colorful, unexpected, heterogenous.

Other art galleries have moved into the area to cultivate newly arrived audiences: Welancora Gallery, which opened in 2002 and with which Tierney has collaborated with a few times; Medium Tings, a roving exhibition space; and Jenkins Johnson Projects, which branched out from its San Francisco roots to create a Brooklyn outpost in 2017.

There are still precious few art venues in the city that aim to support artists and curators, act as a place of discovery and revelation, while also being a linchpin for civic culture. FiveMyles encompasses all these ambitions, and in doing so helps us understand how crucial to our lives art galleries can be.

Four Artists: Two Painters, Two Sculptors

Through Feb. 27, FiveMyles Gallery, 558 St. Johns Place, Crown Heights, Brooklyn; 718-783-4438; fivemyles.org.

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