

North Beach: Art is Alive

By Tony Long
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Ethel Jimenez, owner of Gallery 28
photo: Iris Rowlee

Ten years ago, you could have fired a cannon down any street in North Beach without hitting an art gallery. Art was dead here, the trendies said, proclaiming that the scene had shifted to the hipper, more happenin' Mission.

On the face of it, they appeared to be right. The lack of gallery space was one troubling sign and may have increased the impression that the number of working artists was dwindling in this historically creative neighborhood.

There were reasons for pessimism. Apartment rents were through the roof, thanks in part to the flimsy insanity of the dot-com boom, and the words "artist" and "rent" do not mix felicitously. Commercial rent was high, too, and as moneymakers go, no one will ever confuse a local art gallery with a Starbucks.

Some artists did leave, but others, who had sufficient means or an overabundance of sheer stubbornness, stayed on. For them, persistence paid. Rents dropped, a little anyway, although many artists still can't afford an apartment and live instead in one of the SROs, which are plentiful in North Beach.

The gallery renaissance, if that's what it is, began modestly enough in 2004, when a retired airline pilot named Kevin Brown opened his **Live Worms Gallery**

in the old Figone Hardware storefront at 1345 Grant Avenue. Brown, himself an abstract artist, wanted a work space but also recognized the importance of local artists having somewhere to show the fruits of their labor.

Live Worms has since established itself as the most popular rent-a-gallery-space for locals and others to stage their shows in North Beach, but Brown is no longer alone. In the past few years, galleries have sprouted like warts on a witch's ... umm, arm. Depending on how you define "art gallery," there are easily a dozen in the neighborhood now.

Some, like **Gallery 28** (1228 Grant Avenue) and **Arata Fine Art Gallery** (450 Columbus Avenue), epitomize the traditional gallery space and lend themselves easily to the art parties that are once again popular here.

Others are singular and quirky, a reflection of their owners' interests and sensibilities. These would include photographer John Perino's **Focus Gallery** (1534 Grant Avenue) and Jon van Coop's **Salon La Bicicletta** (641 Green Street, next door to the mortuary).

Walking into Focus Gallery is like entering a Parisian atelier, with paintings and vintage posters and photography hung almost haphazardly on the walls while art-related books, antique photo equipment, and objects of all kinds are strewn about. There's a fine space in the back, however, and Perino is generous in putting it to good use.

Salon La Bicicletta is perhaps the most private gallery in North Beach, a labor of love allowing van Coops to indulge in his two major passions: bicycles and maps. He doesn't keep regular hours but is open by appointment, occasionally turning over his space for other North Beach artists to mount exhibitions.

The timing of all this is interesting. When the local economy was booming, North Beach seemed like an artistic desert. Now, in tough times, the scene is flourishing again. Maybe there's something to that starving-artist-in-the-garret stuff after all.

Ethel Jimenez opened her Gallery 28 a couple of years ago, around the time of the Wall Street meltdown. She never flinched, and never considered any neighborhood other than North Beach.

"I'm from New York," said Jimenez, a former insurance broker. "North Beach reminds me of Park Slope, of the Village. It's a neighborhood."

She's also one of the forces behind First Friday in North Beach, when most of the galleries throw open their doors, luring passersby to the art inside with the promise of some free eats, some wine, and perhaps a little poetry or music. As the name suggests, it falls on the first Friday of every month.

Jimenez remembers the neighborhood's gallery owners joining district Supervisor David Chiu at a summit meeting – at Gallery 28, as it happens – to find ways to promote the North Beach art scene. First Friday was the happy result.

The last time anyone checked, the Mission was still hip and happenin'. But you can remove the toe tag from North Beach. This neighborhood is alive and kicking, too. Dozens of artists roaming the streets in

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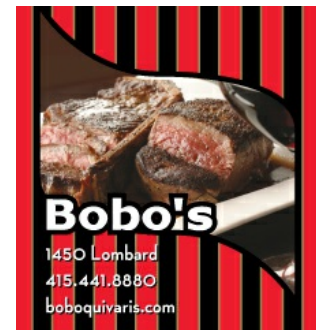
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