

Art outpost cultivates from outside the mainstream

by Sara G. Levin

A red neon star throbs behind the grated Clayton Gallery and Outlaw Museum storefront on Essex Street. The star's lines within a circle represent a magic symbol by John Dee — the mathematician and philosophical advisor to Elizabeth I — said Nico Dios, the work's artist. Backed by cabal history and blocked by a distorting chain-link grate, the image is somehow emblematic of Clayton Patterson's 20-year-old gallery, which strives to show work dipped in a mystic or rebellious aura while, at the same time, being accessible to the general public.

Dios is part of a young generation of artists in their mid-20s whom Patterson sees as compellingly "outside the mainstream," the sort of art that is the gallery's self-proclaimed mission to promote. While existing in defiance of established and well-known museums and galleries, many artists who have been involved with the gallery have made a name for themselves. Patterson maintains that almost everyone who has shown at his gallery has come out with a book, including sexual fetish photographer Charles Gatewood, swastika painter ManWoman and Cuban Santarí oba Baba Raul Canizares.

However, Patterson's passion for eccentric art is also coupled with his own meticulous obsession as a local documentation. He may believe more than anyone in the Lower East Side's importance in American history. While living in Downtown Manhattan over the past 27 years, Patterson developed a mania for photographing and filming events that took place in his neighborhood — he became well known for capturing the 1988 Tompkins Square police riot on film. Now, he is working on various projects to create a historic record of the recent past of the Lower East Side and East Village through his lens, while, at the same time, continuing to show artists he considers part of Downtown's dwindling "outsider, outlaw culture."

"Bloomberg is depleting the creative reservoir of New York City," Patterson said. "Those cheaper rents and ungentrified areas were where the essence of America existed." That fear might be fueling his ambition to organize the extensive collection of photos and film he has amassed.

In the wake of publishing "Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side" two months ago, Patterson has teamed up with Alan Moore, co-editor of "A Day in the Life: Tales from the Lower East Side, 1940-1990," to put together a book about the radical and activist political history of the area, emphasizing the 1980s and '90s. A photo of Councilmember Margarita Lopez sits on top of one of the photo stacks piled on a table for the book's research.

Patterson also receives solicitations for material.

"The people who are filming 'Rent' called me just the other day asking for footage," he said. "What I'd really like is to make [the archives] accessible to academics, though."

Young filmmakers Daniel Levin and Ben Solomon are helping organize Patterson's extensive archive, which includes thousands of reels of video film and still photographs from events ranging from the 1988 riots to a G.G. Allin punk concert. (G.G. Allin was famous for promising to commit suicide on stage before dying of a heroin overdose.) By intercutting Patterson's footage with contemporary interviews of characters like lamppost mosaic artist Jim Power, the filmmakers plan on developing a documentary about Patterson's visual documentary of the Lower East Side.

“As a younger generation, we think his archives have an interesting story to tell,” Levin said. “They’re about the old, grimy, dirty, on-the-fringe New York that people grew up being inspired by.”

Over the years, Patterson has gotten to know people from almost every different community in the neighborhood, from artists to drug dealers, local rabbis and kids from the Al Smith housing projects. Still, much of the footage conveys a fascination for contentious events like drug busts, arrests and fights. But while Patterson has been arrested numerous times — sometimes when crossing police barriers to catch developing stories — he insists that being an “outlaw” does not necessarily mean committing a crime.

“It has to do with a statement that sometimes overshadows beauty,” said painter Jerry Pagane, in describing the kinds of art most likely found at the gallery. Pagane has had numerous works in the Outlaw Museum. “My figures are distorted, abnormal-shaped faces, projecting inner feeling on canvas.” Later this year, after the premiere of a short film, still in the making, about Pagane’s own story comes out, he plans to have a one-man show at the gallery.

Currently, works on display at the Outlaw Museum include pieces by young artists like Dios, photographer Dash Snow and graffiti artist Joey Semz, as well as more established names like Shawn Mortensen, whose three portraits of the Notorious B.I.G., Sonic Youth and Sandinista rebels occupy a cramped hallway opposite the gallery’s kitchen. Italian installation artist Baldo Diodato is coming in next to rearrange the space for his show starting Nov. 20. Though Patterson is enthusiastic about the shows, he is pessimistic about current creative culture in the neighborhood, fearful that new condo apartment buildings and higher rents are changing the area for the worse.

Though many of the works in the gallery are hard to sell, Patterson insists that the gallery’s strength is in harvesting the work of a community. “There’s a dumbing down of culture,” he said. “But the greatest part of this gallery is the incubation, and showing it to people whose subcultures make those connections. It’s not really meant for the general population,” he added of the gallery, which is open solely by appointment or invitation. But many make the effort to come see what Patterson is offering. The gallery guestbook includes signatures by celebrity magician David Blaine and Peter Dinklage of Missing Foundation, who was big in the 1980s East Village scene and is still creating art and music. “You really have to have the desire to come here, the desire to see it and an ambition to try and understand what it’s about.”