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OF ART 2006

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PHOTOGRAPHY GALLERIES JOIN THE EXODUS TO CHELSEA

report DI POOLE

IT IS TRUE TO say New York continues to re-invent itself and the vibrancy and energy of the city is reflected in the rapid and unprecedented transformation of a number of commercial areas into fashionable and affluent residential locations. Chelsea is one such area, having been transformed over the last ten years from a run-down commercial district comprising industrial and warehouse premises to one of the world's largest centres for contemporary art. Now, harbouring more than 300 galleries within its borders, 'Art Chelsea' stretches from West 13th to West 29th Streets; from 10th Avenue to the West Side Highway, and is expanding exponentially eastwards.

If one looks at contemporary art today in New York and elsewhere, it is impossible to ignore photography; you only have to visit some of the major art fairs, not least the *Armory Show* or *Art Basel*, to realise how photography has been embraced by the contemporary art scene. However, photography's authority as an art form is taken for granted now; and photographers no longer have to fight to be recognised within the artistic sphere. Prices for photography are also rising fast. **Sarah Hasted** of Exploring Chelsea for the first time is also an exciting experience. The neighbourhood is fairly remote; you pass a carwash or gas station, and crumbling buildings are juxtaposed with new developments; advertisements hang overhead on the old elevated 'high line' railroad. It is therefore a surprise when you walk down one of the long, wide streets to be confronted by row upon row of art galleries, a few of which lean towards the large, glass frontages that

the younger, emerging galleries experimenting with new concepts. This diversity caters for different audiences and markets, giving an energy to the area that is bubbling with creativity.

launched *Hasted Hunt Gallery* on West 20th Street last October, and promote diverse and often provocative contemporary photography. Their current show, *Paulo Ventura's War Souvenirs*, presents large-format colour photographs of fictional World War II narratives in occupied Italy. **Paulo Ventura** crafts miniature period settings, and populates them with customized figures. The resulting images are dark, often melancholy, tragic dramas.

There is a general feeling amongst the Chelsea photography dealers that the photography scene has developed hand-in-hand with the contemporary art scene. **Brian Clamp**, who established his photography gallery *Clampart* in 2000 explains: 'The photography scene in Chelsea has grown right

alongside the market for work in other media. Postmodernism has truly done its job. Photographs are no longer regarded as some strange "other", and are exhibited and collected on the same level as painting, sculpture, video, et al.' *Clampart* is currently exhibiting late 1960s vintage prints by **Arthur Tress**, based on one of his most celebrated series *Open Space in the Inner City*. It is a unique opportunity to see original works that have been hidden away in boxes in Tress's studio. Not only is this an interesting and rich show, revealing Tress's developments towards surrealist tendencies that were later to become his recognised style, it also goes some way in demonstrating how Chelsea is maturing and deepening in terms of the cross-section of works being exhibited. However, as **Brian**

Clamp explains, 'While Chelsea is truly "ground zero" for contemporary photography, it is not yet necessarily the epicentre for vintage material.'

The recent period of globalisation resulting from the economics of free trade, privatisation and deregulation has also opened up new opportunities to look at art and photography from different parts of the world. **Yossi Milo's** stunning exhibition of photographs by **Sze Tsung Leong** reflects this new trend. The large-format prints capture the dramatic urban changes that have transformed the cities of China; particularly the destruction of traditional neighbourhoods, which once formed the unique and historical identities of China's cities, and are rapidly being superseded by the mass construction of new urban environments. The *Yossi Milo Gallery*, established in a small second floor space on West 24th Street in Chelsea in 1997, amongst the first galleries to be located in the neighbourhood. In March 2005, the gallery moved to its current ground floor space on West 25th Street. **Yossi Milo** enthuses: 'Chelsea is vital to the contemporary art scene in New York. Our gallery is dedicated to contemporary art, specialising in photography. We show artists that push the boundaries of the medium.'

It seems quite pertinent that *Aperture*, a not-for-profit arts institution dedicated to advancing fine photography, founded in 1952, moved its headquarters to Chelsea in September 2005. They moved for various practical reasons and to obtain greater space but perhaps most importantly to be amidst the action. *Aperture's* executive director, **Ellen Harris**, explains "If you have a gallery, you want to be on the gallery circuit, and there are 300 plus galleries within a ten-block radius in Chelsea... we need to be near galleries in order to see the latest of what's being done in photography. Lastly, we want people in the field as well as the general public to perceive that we are a part of this dynamic world, accessible and collaborative." *Aperture* currently have on view an ambitious exhibition entitled *reGeneration*, a selection of 50 emerging photographers from across the globe. With digital photography dominating, the wide range of styles and techniques adopted demonstrates the endless possibilities open to young photographers today. This show, perhaps more than any other, demonstrates the current strength of the international contemporary photography market. Although there are important contemporary galleries in SoHo, on the Lower East Side, in Midtown and on the Upper East Side, Chelsea is currently the location of the highest concentration of contemporary galleries and is likely to be so for many years to come.

