THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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NY CULTURE

The Flower District: The Next Chelsea?

As rents go up, some Manhattan art galleries are moving from Chelsea to the Flower District

Casey Kaplan poses inside his new gallery space in the Flower District in Manhattan. *PHOTO: JOHN TAGGART FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**
Feb. 17, 2015 8:46 p.m. ET

When Casey Kaplan moved his gallery to Chelsea in 2005, the neighborhood wasn't yet a global art mecca. "It was exciting—it felt like the place to be," he said of his time converting a former taxi garage into a gleaming gallery space on West 21st Street.

Now, a decade on, his mood has changed.

"The spirit of the neighborhood is dramatically changing," he said. "A lot of the conversations I've had with artists have been about wanting to break out of the art mall and have a different experience."

To stay in Chelsea and retain his lease, Mr. Kaplan said, would have required paying twice the rent and taking on a much higher share of his building's escalating tax rate.

Instead, he elected to move to a new space in the Flower District, on 27th Street between Sixth and Seventh avenues. It will have double the square footage, he said, for half the cost.

The boutique Ace and NoMad Hotels thrive a few blocks away, and a host of smaller galleries already operate nearby. But the Flower District is "still unfixed and in flux," Mr. Kaplan said. "The grittiness of it is appealing."

The new two-floor Casey Kaplan gallery, opening Feb. 26 with a show by the artist Kevin Beasley, takes up 10,000 square feet formerly filled by wholesale retail shops, including one belonging to a Nigerian sock dealer and another that sold underwear.

The size and the price proved appealing, Mr. Kaplan said, but so did the prospect of fleeing the condo buildings rising up in Chelsea—as well as the competitive density of an art district with nearly 400 galleries.

Mr. Kaplan said fewer conversations he was having in the gallery were about the exhibitions. "It was all about real estate or money or someone else's gallery. Creating a shift in that conversation was incredibly necessary."

The sentiment was shared by Magdalena Sawon, who moved her Postmasters Gallery to Tribeca in 2013 after 15 years in Chelsea.

"We were facing the choice of streamlining what we do to become a more market-minded gallery—or get out," Ms. Sawon said. "There are so many similar-looking places with similar-looking art in them, and it becomes exhausting."

The Flower District doesn't draw the same kinds of numbers but is already on the art-world radar. "It's very dynamic, vibrant, alive," said Cristina Grajales, who is moving her design gallery there from SoHo in May, to a space to be shared with the art dealer Leon Tovar.

She said she likes the area's mix of creative and tech companies: "It's an area with a lot of potential for growth."

Its proximity to Chelsea may ultimately make it part of the same milieu, according to David Halle and Elisabeth Tiso, co-authors of a new book, "New York's New Edge:

Construction workers inside Casey Kaplan's new gallery space in the Flower District in Manhattan. *PHOTO: JOHN TAGGART FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Contemporary Art, the High Line, and Urban Megaprojects on the Far West Side."

"The galleries are growing in Chelsea," said Mr. Halle, who counted 10 new galleries since the book went to print last summer, "and moving north into Hell's Kitchen, Hudson Yards East and Midtown West. It's becoming a cultural behemoth."

Recent growth has been spurred by the opening this spring of the new Whitney Museum of American Art, at the lower end of the High Line, and the planned Culture Shed project at the top, near Hudson Yards. But the gallery district has remained robust on its own, despite threats from outside.

A foundation of star galleries—roughly 30 of which own their buildings, by the estimation of Mr. Halle and Ms. Tiso—suggest a stable future for the gallery district's core.

And while some smaller galleries may leave or be forced to flee, others see prospects rising up around them.

"I'm very optimistic with all the residential buildings going up," said Lori Bookstein, who has rented her gallery space on 10th Avenue since relocating there from the Upper East Side in 2008. "That means lots of people with lots of walls."

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