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Art Rediscovered a Home on the Upper East Side

by Roberta Smith

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As an art gallery scene, the Upper East Side may have an identity problem. The phrase itself lacks the cutting-edge hipness of those charmed double syllables, "SoHo" and "Chelsea." And the actual area -- less a neighborhood than an aggregate of them -- is amorphously vague of border and devoid of geographical cohesion.

In addition it is chockablock with museums -- small, large, rich, poor -- that stretch 35 blocks from the Frick Collection to El Museo del Barrio, in a so-called Museum Mile that is closer to two. Without much logic, the conditions contribute to a downtown prejudice that sees the Upper East Side as both diffuse and monolithic: the land of museums, museum trustees and private dealers, not galleries and artists.

But these days, when SoHo is dotted with stores as chic as Madison Avenue's and Chelsea is dotted with galleries as chic as museums, a change of attitude seems to be in order.

It should be remembered that 20 years ago, before SoHo's rise, there was plenty of new art to be found above 72d Street. Leo Castelli's gallery, representing the Pop and Minimalist artists, was on East 77th Street, around the corner from Sotheby Parke-Bernet, the city's leading auction house. Ronald Feldman, who gave first New York shows to Joseph Beuys, Chris Burden and Hannah Wilke, was on 74th, in a building since swallowed up by the Whitney. At 24 East 81st, the Bykert Gallery (a fusion of the surnames of its partners, Jeffrey Byers and Klaus Kertess) introduced the painters Brice Marden, Chuck Close and Joe Zucker, as well as Alan Saret, Dorothea Rockburne and Peter Campus, who created (gasp) installation pieces in the small rooms of a once-elegant brownstone.

These days new art is still more likely to appear downtown, but at the moment, the Upper East Side's galleries and alternative-type institutions contain a great deal of interesting work by artists living, dead, blue-chip, emerging or struggling in obscurity. And its quiet, tree-lined streets are a pleasant change from the congested sidewalks of SoHo and 57th Street and the wide-open desolation of Chelsea.

Barbara Bloom

GLENN HOROWITZ BOOKSELLER may have earned a little niche in the history of late Conceptual Art. For the centennial of Vladimir Nabokov's birth, Mr. Horowitz invited the artist Barbara Bloom to create an installation using the Nabokov material he had assembled. This included a great number of first editions annotated by the author or inscribed to his wife (and first reader and typist), Vera, almost always with a drawing of a butterfly. There are also nearly two dozen first editions of Nabokov's most famous book, "Lolita," in different languages and with wide-ranging jacket designs.

The resulting installation is a marvel that if carefully attended to can give the viewer/reader the odd sensation of being inside Nabokov's brain, where various passions -- for writing and language, for the collection and study of butterflies, for history and for his wife -- mingle, illuminate and incite one another.

Ms. Bloom, whose interest in Nabokov is longstanding, achieved this with her usual sense of craft, which is more than a little obsessive itself. She has created a rug based on the author's copy of an edition of "Lolita," its green cover heavily annotated. On the computer she designed a font based on Nabokov's handwriting so she can display excerpts from his books on the 3-by-5 cards on which he wrote them. There's even Nabokov wallpaper, dotted with butterflies, snippets of annotated text, corrected copy, deletions and additions as well as the noticeably ribald verses of an unpublished poem version of "Lolita."

Under glass are displays of butterflies, including the blues that were Nabokov's particular passion, and arrangements of tiny photographs, many of them doubled into wing-like symmetry.

This is a dizzying show, which may precipitate a reading or rereading of the master's works and is probably most comprehensible when viewed with a magnifying glass, given the fineness of some of the print. Ultimately, one comes away thinking of the pages of Nabokov's open books as the wings of butterflies. He scrutinized both with an intensity that this show makes fantastically manifest.