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ART

Scruffy? Yes. Stuffy? No.

Diverse galleries and an edgy vibe draw a crowd to the Downtown Art Walk.

April 14, 2005 | Liane Bonin, Special to The Times

It's 8 o'clock on a Thursday night, and the Bert Green Fine Art gallery is quietly bustling as art aficionados soberly inspect the first L.A. showing of Valerie Jacobs' politically charged paintings. A block away, a crowd of creative types nibbles on cheese and crackers at the 626 Gallery, where the vibrant work of African American artists Synthia St. James and Charles Bibb is on view. A little farther down the street, the Iron Eyes Gallery has amped up the volume. The owners are holding a party, complete with a DJ and a cluster of twentysomething revelers. "I heard Drew Barrymore came last month," one guest yells over the music.

It could be any city's art walk, with the same hipster crowd and hipper artwork, but this one has a little extra, shall we say, ambience. Situated in downtown L.A. and running since September, this monthly trek from gallery to gallery involves negotiating one's way around some gritty streets. But with 19 galleries confirmed for today's walk and the promise of viewing some interesting works, art lovers are willing to overlook some big city blight.

"It's getting better," says Downtown Art Walk originator Bert Green, whose gallery sees upward of 200 people on most Art Walk days. "The businesses downtown like Pete's Cafe are getting busier, so that's making a difference. But when people call up and ask if it's safe to come here, I tell them, look, anything can happen, but anything can happen anywhere. If you don't feel safe, don't come. But if you have a sense of adventure, come with an open mind."

If you're willing to dodge a few panhandlers in your quest, the walk is a quick subway ride to Pershing Square. (Dedicated gas guzzlers can find inexpensive parking lots on the Art Walk map online.) Most of the stops are on Gallery Row: Main and Spring streets, between 2nd and 9th. Until this month, the walk included galleries east of San Pedro Street and south of Olympic Boulevard, but they are choosing to stay off the list until a rough plan kicks in to extend DASH bus hours on walk nights. Alas, even art can't overcome a fundamental truth about Angelenos: Sure, we'll walk, but not that far.

The artwork to be found during the March event covered a dizzying array of styles and mediums. At the Los Angeles Center for Digital Art you could soak up the satirical Bush-bashing photography of Chris Anthony, then wander the few blocks to Infusion to view the Miro-esque modernism of Jenik. At Iron Eye there were street-tough tattoo-inspired canvases by Mister Cartoon, and just downstairs at Kristi Engle were snarky video installations by Joel Huschle. Stumbling across the delicate plein-air landscapes of Star Higgins at M.J. Higgins offered relief from the sensory overload.

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While much of the art was aggressive and assured, not all of the galleries were quite so sophisticated. Though there are grand dames like MOCA and the Museum of Neon Art as well as veterans like Green and 626 owner Tom Pratt, some owners are learning as they go.

Canvases lean against the walls or flop against chair backs. One gallery ties a curtain across a hallway to create an impromptu lobby; they have no choice, having dedicated their single room to a video installation. Another gallery isn't quite ready for Art Walk, with owners hanging paintings and arguing over placement as people enter to see what the fuss is all about. In another space, the sole observer and her companion are tapped on the shoulder by the owner. "Look, I have got to go out for a bit, but just sign your name on the guest list if you have any questions," he says with a smile. "And don't steal anything!"

The rough-around-the-edges art school vibe means that there's none of the stuffiness you might expect when it comes to art. For those with tight budgets, there's a chance to see scads of art for free, sans the sales pitch.

The good feelings also extend to the gallery owners. "There's not the usual sense of competition. I feel like I can call any of the people on the Art Walk and say, 'Hey, I have a question,' " says Kristi Engle. Like many on the Art Walk, she is a newbie, having opened her doors in November. "There's absolutely a sense of community here."

The hard part could be making it last. As with every other part of the city, the more appealing downtown becomes, the higher rents will go, potentially sending gallery owners scrambling for cheaper digs. "We in the art world are good at that kind of thing," Green jokes. "It's an oversimplification, but we come into an area, fix it up, and then get kicked out."

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Downtown Art Walk

Where: Walk is centered on Spring and Main streets, between 2nd and 9th streets, downtown L.A.

When: Noon to 9 p.m., second Thursday of every month

Price: Free

Info: www.downtownartwalk.com