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## Good Art, Mixed Block

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*How a Thriving Gallery Scene Came to Fifth and Main*

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by Lea Lion

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The block of Fifth Street between Main and Spring streets has a movie-worthy story arc: a fast rise, followed by hard fall and then, against all odds, a comeback.

Located in Downtown's Historic Core, the block kicked off the 20th century with a bang. In 1913, the finest building in the city, the Rosslyn Hotel (also known as the Million Dollar Hotel) claimed the northwest corner of Fifth and Main, proving so popular that an annex was built across the street.

Over the years, the hotel declined into a flophouse. By the '80s, drugs were sold openly inside and outside addicts shot up on the sidewalk. Fifth Street east of Pershing Square was a gateway to Skid Row.

In recent years, however, the block has staged a comeback. In 2003, Gallery Row was established between Second and Ninth streets and Main and Spring streets. Then, starting in 2004, five art galleries - Bert Green Fine Art, El Nopal Press, L.A. Center for Digital Photography, Pharmaka Art and INMO Gallery - set up shop on the ground floors of the Rosslyn buildings after owner Rob Frontiera provided affordable space. Now, the 100 block of West Fifth Street is one of Downtown's top art destinations and regularly attracts more than 1,000 visitors for the Downtown Artwalk on the second Thursday of the month.

Recently, *Los Angeles Downtown News* caught up with the gallery owners of Fifth Street to find out more about how good art came to a block with a history of hard knocks.



(l to r) Gallery owners Fumiko Amano, Francesco X. Siqueiros, Shane Guffogg, Bert Green, Rex Bruce and Inmo Yuon on Main Street. They all opened spaces in an area still struggling for a turnaround. Photo by Gary Leonard.



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Pharmaka Art: No conversation about Pharmaka Art goes very far without co-directors Fumiko Amano and Shane Guffogg explaining the origin of the gallery's name. An ancient Greek word that means "to paint," Pharmaka is a fitting appellation for this gallery established in January of 2005 by 14 painters. But, Amano adds, Pharmaka also translates as "remedy," which is exactly what the space has proven to be for the corner.



Unlike its Fifth Street counterparts, Pharmaka Art is a non-profit rather than a commercial gallery. It was founded, Guffogg said, as a "grand experiment" based on the question, "What does it mean to be a painter right now?"

In January Pharmaka Art will attempt to answer that question, visually, with the show *L.A. Ethos*, in which dozens of Los Angeles-based artists will share one large canvas hung on the gallery's walls. The exhibit runs through January.

*Pharmaka Art, 101 W. Fifth St., (213) 689-7799 or pharmaka-art.org.*



L.A. Center for Digital Art: One storefront down from Pharmaka Art is the L.A. Center for Digital Art, a gallery for technology-based works. Founded by Rex Bruce in 2004, LACDA inhabits a high-ceilinged, white-walled space organized around an oversized digital printer on the gray concrete floor.

Originally located in Hollywood, Bruce moved LACDA to Downtown Los Angeles after meeting fellow gallerist Bert Green, who Bruce calls the "kingpin" of the Fifth Street art scene.

"When I first came down, I walked by this corner and I thought, 'Oh my God, I am definitely not going to move there. This is the very worst corner of the whole of Gallery Row,'" Bruce recalled.

Now, he sees the five-gallery cluster on Fifth Street as "Ground Zero for Gallery Row."

On a recent visit to the gallery, the buzz of drills mingled with the whirl of passing buses as an exhibit of photographer Edward Bateman's fanciful images is hung for an upcoming Artwalk opening. The exhibit runs through Jan. 6.

*L.A. Center for Digital Art, 107 W. Fifth St., (323) 646-9427 or lacda.com.*

El Nopal Press: Only the old-school printing press at El Nopal Press could outdo the impressive digital printer at LACDA. A peek through the glass storefront of Francesco X. Siqueiros' one-room gallery reveals a 1958 Mailander proofing press from Germany. Ask Siqueiros why he ended up on Fifth Street and the short answer is that the two-ton press couldn't fit anywhere else.

Of course, that's only part of the story. Like his neighbors, Siqueiros landed on Fifth Street thanks to the potent cocktail of Bert Green and Downtown activist Brady Westwater, who helped the gallery owner find an affordable space.

An active member of the Los Angeles art community for more than 15 years, Siqueiros sees the Fifth Street scene as part of a larger movement. When asked if his block is an art hub, he responded, "I agree, but with a grain of salt.

"We shouldn't forget the efforts of the galleries that were here before us," he added.

Siqueiros pointed out another reason not to crack the champagne just yet.

"So far [rent] is under control," he said, "But as we know, the formula is that the artists, who are so much a part of developing the infrastructure to get people to start coming to the impacted neighborhoods, eventually suffer by their own creation."

Currently, one wall of Siqueiros' gallery displays a collection of black-and-white photographs hung by a local homeless advocacy group. On the other walls, an ongoing exhibit of colorful images from recent press publications dangle in a clothesline-like fashion.

*<El Nopal Press, 109 W. Fifth St., (323) 581-7112 or fauxpop.com/nopalpress.*

Inmo Gallery: Across the street from El Nopal Press is INMO Gallery. Lacking a conventional sign, the only clue that the gallery exists is a 1960s sign that reads "Billy's Coffee Shop" and has an arrow covered in tiny light bulbs pointing to the front door.

Originally located in Chinatown, owner Inmo Yuon's gallery reopened on Fifth Street in 2005. He described the street scene he found outside his door then as "a jungle."

Recently, Yuon has been taking full advantage of his Fifth Street location by opening a de facto school of philosophy called the Nickel School (portions of Fifth Street in Skid Row are known as the Nickel) for what he referred to as the area's "drug addicts, drug dealers and gangsters." His latest exhibit, a group show titled *Space Juice*, includes work by two Nickel School students. The exhibit does not yet have a closing date.

*Inmo Gallery, 114 W. Fifth St., (213) 626-5225 or inmogallery.com.*

Bert Green Fine Art: A pioneer of the Downtown art scene, Green moved his gallery from Los Feliz to the ground floor of the Rosslyn Hotel in the fall of 2004. Although Green was instrumental in bringing other galleries to the block, he, perhaps modestly, does not consider it to be a hub.

"A hub is not the word I would use. It's a cluster," Green said. "What's happening is that as the area develops and more people open spaces you see these little centers of activity that are occurring along Gallery Row. And Fifth and Main, right now, happens to be the largest of those clusters."

An exhibit of new paintings by Linda LaBella, Bret Philpot and Peter Romberg is on view through Dec. 23. Then, on Jan. 11, Ecuadorian artist Eduardo Villacis' solo show *Smoking Mirror* opens. According to Green, the exhibit will transform two-thirds of his expansive gallery into "a mock museum installation, which demonstrates an alternative history of a reverse conquest of Europe by the Aztecs." The exhibit runs through March.

*Bert Green Fine Art, 102 W. Fifth St., (213) 624-6212 or bgfa.us.*

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