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THE

My Miller

The festive art gallery in a casket factory

WHEN ARTISTS moved to the old cast-iron-front warehousing district south of Houston St. in New York City several years ago, they were followed quickly by spacious storefront galleries. The whole New York benefited with a new artistic center — SoHo.

It didn't replace 'Uptown' — the 57th St. and higher galleries — but it added a younger, less formal, less "safe" aspect to the art capital's art world.

The question is, is Chicago ready for its own SoHo? A number of galleries are saying yes, although nobody agrees on where it might be.

The last few years have given us the John Doyle Gallery, in a onetime bakery at 1962 N. Russell, and, more recently, the Chicago Gallery, around the corner at 2044 N. Halsted. Another area is just north of the Chicago River, where a number of artists have loft studios and the cooperative gallery N.A.M.E. moved to roomy quar-

ters at 9 W. Hubbard last fall.

THIS ART season, two more galleries have staked out SoHo-like settings in what they hope will turn out to become SoHo-like localities. One is completely new to the Chicago art community, begun by a graduate of the School of the Art Institute in a former casket factory at 1134 W. Washington, one block from the Randolph St. market. The other is a revival at 368 W. Huron by two Chicago art dealers who used to have a gallery in South Shore in the 1960s.

Gallery 1134, as the Washington Blvd. newcomer is called, was founded by Loren Billings earlier this year and is directed by her fellow Art Institute alumnus Al Ornelas. Loren has been a professional ice skater and a fashion model, and later a fashion columnist for an Evergreen Park newspaper, then edited by Robert Billings, now her husband.

As an artist, Mrs. Billings has

sculpted, painted, assisted ceramicist Ruth Duckworth with her mural at the University of Chicago's Geophysical Building, and is now interested in laser light electronic environments.

THE BILLINGSES bought the 1134 building as a home cum studio cum gallery. Their idea is to offer large chunks of the three-story, 77-year-old building to other artists as studios, for which there is ample room at 5,000 square feet per floor, and use the rent to support the gallery.

Loren and Ornelas have their studios in the basement, where she expects to install ceramic and glass kilns, welding and other equipment. Three other artists have rented space in other parts of the building, and the first floor gallery offers 4,000 square feet of display area.

The building is a yellow brick structure that beckons passersby with festive banners and a glassy entrance. Inside,

the legacy of the Walter H. Rudolph Casket Co. is unmistakable. The gallery, like much of the building, is paneled in oak with Greek key trim, studded with whitewashed fluted columns, and floored in dusky green flower-patterned carpet. The elaborate decor seems to enhance the environmental pieces as assuredly as it destroys the paintings.

THERE IS A good deal more space to rent out, much of it still filled with reminders of its former tenant. The building is mammoth, with loading dock, dumbwaiter and a walnut-paneled, hand-operated elevator.

There are stacks of burial clothes and fancy cords, bolts of velvet and boxes of metal casket trimming, a round sewing machine for tufted shrouds, and even some leftover caskets and crypts. The place is a customer's and set designer's delight, so it wasn't too surprising to notice that a casket turned

up as main prop in the opening performance piece.

Inauguration was Jan. 23, gallery director Ornelas' birthday. The opening show featured nine artists. All were either teachers at the Art Institute school or ex-students. The current exhibit (through April 18) includes five artists — again three teachers from the Art Institute and one recent graduate and one professor from Northeastern Illinois University, Leo Segedin.

SEGEDIN IS the best known of these artists. Here his seering colors and eerie, decadent light pit order against organism in vibrant and disturbing canvases. Sculptor James Zanzi's captured environments, in colored and often scratched Plexiglas, are similarly disturbing — projecting a view of life attuned to destruction.

In contrast are Donald Heim's formalist exercises, the cheeky wit of Fred Naglebach's twiggy insertions and Roxie

Tremonto's highly accomplished ceramic tile pieces. Tremonto seems to revel in the expressive possibilities of bad taste, swaddling his pieces in AstroTurf or throwing in a toy figure, and then pulls such reassuring qualities as gravity or scale right out from under them.

Next show on the roster is "Spumoni Village," a festival being produced by Chicago sculptor Cosmo Campoli and his friends, to open May 7.

Both founder and director promise that the gallery will remain open to fresh ideas, with more concern for creating a community for art than in offering objects for sale, and with no concern for exclusive rights to any artist's work.

MORE ALONG THE beaten art track is the Zolla-Lieberman Gallery, which opened March 13 in an old coffee-urn factory at 368 W. Huron, more recently the editorial offices of the peri-



Gallery 1134, on Washington Blvd., is making its bid to bring SoHo to Chicago.

odical New Art Examiner. The gallery is a block away from where Mickey Pallas' Center for Photographic Arts tried — and failed — to make a go of it a couple of seasons ago.

Robert Zolla is a retired decorating contractor and consultant, trained in law at the University of Chicago. Roberta Lieberman has a fine arts degree from the University of Wisconsin and has consulted on art for colleges and corporations. Privately, she is vice president of the prison reform John Howard Assn.

In 1965, the two opened a gallery at 7812 S. Coles, which stayed opened for seven years, in addition to a six-month stab at a gallery in Carl Sandburg Village in 1967. Later they went into private art dealing and have now decided to go public again because, as Zolla put it, "there's more of a tendency for galleries to share expenses and to cooperate."

What he is talking about is

borrowing works and artists from other — especially New York — dealers to offer to the Chicago market. The opening show (through May 1), for instance, is a melange of stellar work from the late '60s and early '70s — Stella, Warhol, Rosenquist, Flavin, Judd and others — borrowed from the prestigious Leo Castelli gallery in New York.

Along with this "accepted and important" work, the gallery intends to show its own contracted artists, beginning May 7 with Chicagoan Harry Bouras.

OTHER ADVANCE scheduling includes a discovery show in July and August of Midwest and New York young talent for which the gallery had the help of staff at New York's Whitney and Guggenheim Museums; a surrealist show involving Gorky, Ernst and maybe Miro in September; and an individual show of New York artist Debo-

rah Remington. Chicagoans may remember her radiant metallic painting seen in an Art Institute survey of contemporary art a few years ago.

Zolla says artwork will be priced anywhere between \$200 and \$20,000. The gallery also has accepted commissions, such as being go-between for the Madison (Wis.) Art Center with Mrs. Robert B. Mayer to arrange for a loan of part of her late husband's vast collection.

The gallery space is, like Gallery 1134's, 4,000 square feet big. It is, however, finished more in what has become the typical SoHo mode — rough wood floor and columns, exposed brick and white plaster-board walls, track lighting.

About the neighborhood, Zolla waxes enthusiastic. "Maybe Chicago is ready for loft style," he says. "This area might turn into another SoHo."

There seems to be a lot of that going around.