

Art comes back to the West Village

by Alexandra Bolen

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Once upon a time, before the influx of sushi, shoes and nail salons, the West Village was known for its contemporary art.



[Ben Funk](#)

The Al Johnson art company had a wide variety of work on display in its gallery.

Thankfully, someone is trying to bring the area's artistic credibility back.

Two months ago, Chashama, an organization that provides space for New York artists to present their work, chose a room on West Eighth Street for Al Johnson Art, Inc.'s next exhibition, entitled "You Can't Die of a Broken Heart."

Johnson, a professional painter and illustrator, is famous for his energetic paintings and portraits as well as his commercials, videos and storyboards of popular films and TV shows like "Sex and the City" and "Six Feet Under."

When Johnson saw the space on West Eighth Street, he decided to bring in four other artists' work to display alongside his own. He chose Lisa Ingram, Ademola Olugebefola, Caleb Nussear and Christian March because their work and style complimented the message conveyed by his work.

"I wanted to put together an art exhibition that could visually heal people through the blending and spiraling of colors and shapes," Johnson said.

The room is long and narrow; the artwork is neatly hung on top of white wood-paneled walls and grouped by artist. Most of the pieces in the exhibition are abstract. Johnson's tiles — small squares covered with vivid designs and paint splatter — capture spontaneity, while Ingram's use of geometric shapes translates the rhythm and textures of sound into colors, movements and irregular patterns.

Pulled in off the street for one of their Saturday receptions, I was immediately drawn not only to the art itself but to the sense of community created by the space.

"To create a harmonic space you have to find the right people and artists, then get them to create and share and work together to build art, whether it's the art itself or an exhibition," Johnson said.

What the combination creates is energy, liveliness. Johnson said artists are always a dynamic community, learning from each other and from their audience to build an artistic identity.

March, a former electrician, is one such individual finding his identity as an artist. He had one piece in the exhibit: a table.

"I want people to think, but it's also a funny message. I want to be able to put a smile on people's faces," March said.

March handed me his business card — an old MetroCard with a sticker on it. The sticker had his name, number and the title "Global Warmer." I flipped it over; his e-mail address was under the bold, all-caps phrase "COPS LIE!"

"Yeah, I put random phrases on them for fun," March said. "People take life too seriously. You have to be able to make fun of yourself."

On my way out, he shouted, "Make a sculpture out of your dreams!"

When he did that, he ended up with a light fixture made out of car headlights.

Though the current exhibition was taken down on Feb. 15, the company as well as the artists will continue to show their work in the area.

Johnson's next major project is creating over 300 storyboards for the new film "After.Life" starring Christina Ricci, which debuts on April 5. And this time, he leaves the art community with a statement to ponder.

"Art is not always logical ... the art on display is the physical embodiment of my spirituality. And this is what we are celebrating here."

Alexandra Bolen is a contributing writer.