

## Old Brewery Boosts Harlem Artists

By [Tahiat Mahboob](#) on Nov 21st, 2010

The scaffolding outside 461 W. 126<sup>th</sup> St. hides the big red and orange letters that spell out “chashama” across the wall and front door. But even without the scaffolding, it’s hard to tell that inside this former brewery lies a gallery and studio spaces for 25 Harlem artists.

Chashama, a non-profit organization, finds temporary vacant commercial buildings around the city and reaches agreements with landlords to create spaces for visual artists. In Sept. 2006, when it converted this two-story building into studios and a gallery, it attracted artists from across Harlem, giving them space not only to create their work but also to construct a community.

“There’s a lot of camaraderie,” says Roy Secord, an artist-in-residence and one of two proctors for the location. “You don’t feel isolated.”

Secord, a geometric abstractionist, has worked at the Harlem space for a year and a half, in a studio on the first floor. But there are studios all around the building, in the east and west wings and on the second floor. And artists don’t have to go very far to display their work: The gallery is at the front of the building, right through the front door.

Founded in 1995 by Anita Durst, Chashama’s main goal has been to temporarily convert empty buildings to create affordable spaces so that artists can remain in New York. “It’s a win-win situation,” Secord says. The conversion generates good public relations for commercial landlords and as Lisa Ingram, an abstractionist painter, points out, “It’s good for the community.”



“It’s another cultural destination for tourists and natives of Harlem,” says Aleathia Brown, a visual arts coordinator at Harlem Arts Alliance. She has been an artist-in-residence for two years and says that people in the area can deal directly with artists; they don’t have to go downtown to enjoy art. Having a formal space in which she can show her work to exhibitors and collectors has been helpful too. “People, when they see that you have a studio, take it more seriously,” she says.

“I think people like it,” adds Elaine Defibaugh, another artist-in-residence. I think it lets them see something new and different.”

Roy Secord talks about his artwork and studio in Harlem. (Photo by Tahiat Mahboob)

Secord agrees and describes a group of local schoolchildren who visited the space and were fascinated by what the artists were doing.

He explains how the residency process works: An artist must submit an application and be interviewed by Chashama administrators. Once deemed a professional artist, he or she pays a nominal monthly fee and signs a six-month contract that can be renewed. Chashama requires each artist-in-residence to spend at least 30 hours per week at the studio.

The fee at the Harlem building ranges from \$100 to \$275, depending on studio size. But, as Secord explains, that fee doesn't come close to covering the building's electric bill, which approaches \$30,000 in winter. That cost is covered by grant money. "We have a lot of benefits to spread the word," says programming director Janus Jaworski. Chashama's extensive list of partners and supporters include: Harlem Arts Alliance, New York City Economic Development Corporation, National Endowment for the Arts, Council Speaker Christine Quinn, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Condè Nast Publications and Google Inc.

The maze of studios on both floors includes both small cubicles with neatly arranged furniture and full-fledged rooms with giant works-in-progress and art supplies strewn about.

Secord's studio reflects his artwork. His pieces have strong clean lines and geometric shapes. The various pieces stacked neatly around the space use either acrylic paint or shiny Mylar sheets.

A Texas native, Secord moved to New York City 15 years ago with a suitcase, a box of art supplies and around \$210 in his pocket. A recipient of the Pollock-Krasner art grant, he has lived in Harlem ever since and runs a construction business when he's not creating art.

Secord says that having a space like this will continue to enhance the community. "People don't understand the vibrancy Harlem has," he says.

Taken From: <http://theuptowner.org/2010/11/21/old-brewery-boosts-harlem-artists/>