

THE PHOENIX

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Artist Debra Masters (Phoenix/Naijar Photo)

The Rising Tide Of Waterfront Art

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Waterfront Artists Emerge Down Under

BY HILARY DUNST

"I moved to Brooklyn when I decided to get serious," says sculptor David Schafer, a member of the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition (BWAC).

Jumbo Dumbo is the not-so-serious name of BWAC's eighth annual Spring Show. And while some of the work on view is humorous, the collection as a whole is nothing to laugh at. BWAC artists, who work and live in the area beneath the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges known as Dumbo, are serious about their work. And if BWAC binds them as an artistic community, they are individualistic in choice of subject, material and execution of their art.

More than 100 BWAC artists are represented in the group show at 68 Jay Street. The work ranges from small black and white drawings to large and colorful canvases. Soft sculptures are contrasted with works in wood and steel. There are pieces set up along the gallery floor, and mobiles extending from the ceiling. From the puzzlingly non-objective to more than one style of realism, the show expresses the eclectic talents and interests of BWAC members.

The show also includes one video by photographer, filmmaker and video-artist Ronald L.C. Kienhuis. Entitled "Down Under," the black and white piece features the music of the popular Men at Work song of the same name. Kienhuis has changed the lyrics, so that it refers to his "down under" — DUMBO. The video seems simply amusing at first, until the viewer stops and listens carefully. It then becomes a piece with a political intent.

Schafer is one of the artists who uses it in his work. His two pieces on view in the gallery, "Silly Old Goat" and "The Cup," are constructed of welded steel. "Steel is practical," he explains, "I can work through my ideas with speed."

PLAYING WITH INDUSTRIALISM

Schafer combines the industrial aesthetic and vocabulary of his pieces with playfulness. Both pieces are movable and, says Schafer, interactive. "The Cup" is constructed of a seat which springs up and down, and a cup built on a handlebar which allows it to "pour." "There is an interaction between the viewer and the piece," he says. "Viewers see an empty container, and they immediately fill it with whatever they want. It activates the imagination."

Schafer admits his pieces, like "Silly Old Goat" are ambiguous. "I want the viewer to impose his own narrative," he explains. It is up to the viewer to decide exactly what this sculpture, which is on wheels with a block hanging from the end of a working spring, is all about.

A native of Kansas City, Schafer moved to the East Village in 1983, took a studio in TriBeCa, and proceeded to enjoy the parties and gallery openings for which the Manhattan art world is famous, until he "decided to get serious."

Finding a studio in which he could construct his sculptures — some of which are 13 feet high — was Schafer's first priority, and one reason the area attracted him. BWAC, he adds, makes DUMBO a more vital artistic community. "It's one of the things in the neighborhood that lassoes the people together," he says.



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LANDLORDS DOWN UNDER

"I come from a land Down Under," sings Kienhuis "where artists work and landlords plunder." Kienhuis is referring to the problems many BWAC members have been having with both their landlords and with the city in having their status as loft tenants in the area recognized — and legalized.

Only half the BWAC artists who actually live in the area are doing so legally. A proposal to rezone the area for residential use was rejected by the Board of Estimate last January. The amended plan passed requires that a building must have had a 45 percent residential use since 1981 to be legal.

Kienhuis is one of few DUMBO residents not in danger of being evicted. His video, however, reflects the concerns of group members facing the loss of relatively inexpensive lofts spacious enough in which to work.

Shot in black and white, the video uses shadows to evoke the mood of the somewhat desolate neighborhood. "You're constantly reminded that it is an industrial area," says Kienhuis.

Industrialism is one of the unstated themes of the gallery show; sculptor David

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Schafer expressed concern about problems in the neighborhood, however, such as crime and the problems with zoning. "People are dealing with a lot in this neighborhood. They're committed to their work."

GAVE UP THE LAW

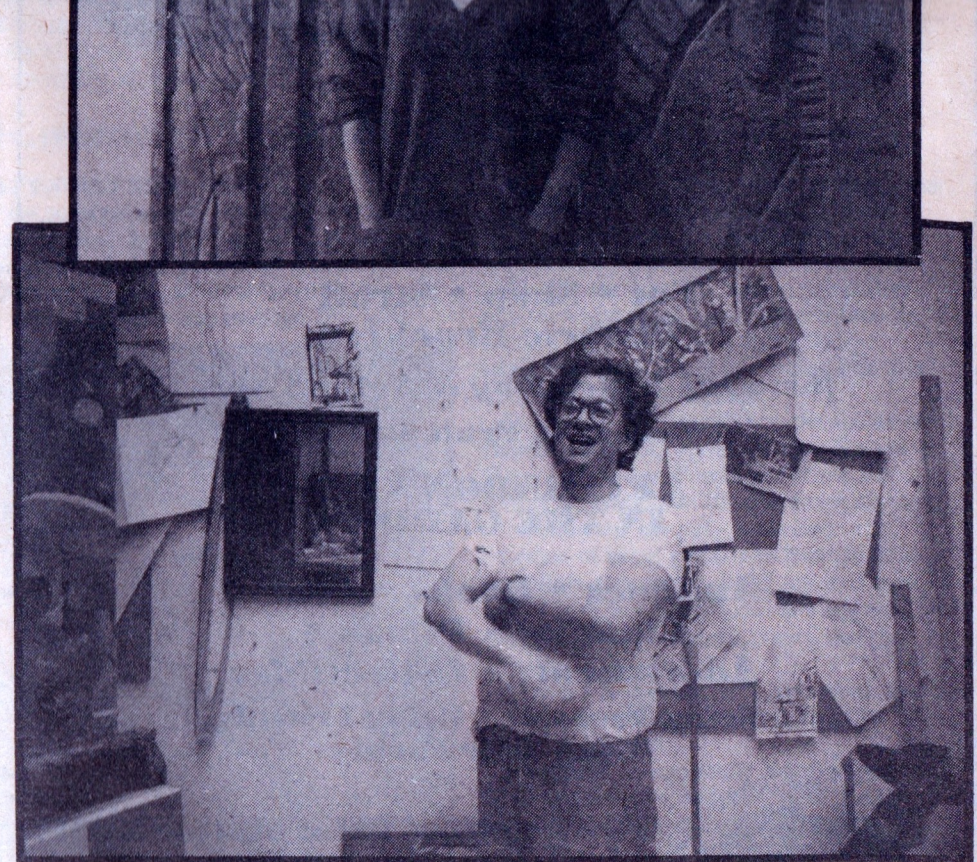
Barbara Pollack is another of BWAC's dedicated artists — now that she is one, full time. A Brooklyn native, Pollack's first career was law, which she gave up three years ago to pursue her love of painting.

"I was one of those crazy people who had studio space during law school," said Pollack. "When I started practicing law, I realized I would have to make a choice."

After spending six months searching for a usable space in Manhattan, Pollack found DUMBO, and her studio at 79 Jay Street. The price was right, and so, it turns out, was the neighborhood. "It's very peaceful and very good for concentration," she explains. "I've gotten a lot of work done here."

Pollack is currently working on a series of paintings based on Polaroid photographs. "Polaroids are a way of making images that we all grew up with, and that we take for granted," she says. "It's an instant way

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DUMBO at work: (from top) artists Richard Clark, Debra Masters, and Patrick Webb in their waterfront studios. (Phoenix Photos by Nabil Najjar)