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Numark Closes. So Does the District Need Galleries?

I've been sitting on the news for a bit now, and today it's official: Numark Gallery is closing. Best of luck to Cheryl with her future ventures. But of course the rest of us are wondering, what's it mean for the District?

In certain terms, the city has lost its last interesting storefront gallery space. Plenty of people will tell you that you don't need large white cubes with bay doors to show interesting work—look at all the stuff at Conner, or Jae Ko at Marsha Mateyka, or whichever show in Bethesda, all residential or nongallery commercial spaces that have been converted into galleries. I appreciate those spaces, but there are modes of contemporary art that just won't fit through those doors. Artworks that just don't hang right in a Dupont townhouse. Numark Gallery was the biggest gallery in town and, yes, was able to show the biggest work (for whatever that counts&mndash;I think there's a point about diversity there), but it was also the best looking gallery in town and while I'm not going to say that one followed the other, Cheryl Numark set out to make a Chelsea art space and attract not only the brightest local talent but also bona fide international stars, and she did that. I don't remember Numark ever putting on a chintzy show.

So there are real, material losses with that space closing. At the same time, I'm not convinced that there were real, material deficits that led to that space closing. I'm confused about what advantage the virtual space/art "advisory" role has beyond the gallery space—since it seems to be the case that Numark wasn't forced to close her gallery but rather decided she didn't need one.

How can a gallerist not need a gallery? Two reasons why come to mind. One, the District buyer base is so anemic that one doesn't need a physical market to host all the market transactions. The dealers know the buyers and work with artists to supply those sales, and whether for good or bad, they don't trust that exposure to the marketplace will grow more buyers. So Cheryl Numark pours the rent money into art fairs and developing patron relationships between her clientele (artists and buyers), and so on.

Or two, Cheryl Numark just wasn't very interested in operating a gallery, and is perhaps better at other things and will do those things now and she won't really be doing exactly what people assume she'll be doing (dealing without a space). I don't know her personally and haven't worked with her; I don't know her health issues, which she's cited; I take with a grain of salt claims about what it's like to work with her—but the turnover in gallery staff was high. The space has been around for a damned short time. I never saw a chintzy show there, but I also didn't see Numark do enough with a star like Dan Steinhilber (whom, I'll go out on a limb and guess here, will be swept up by Annie Gawlak). Not to

speaking ill of the recently space-departed, but it does have some bearing on whether the District gallery scene is collapsing.

I do think that we have an opportunity to put some metrics to the District's ability to attract buyers. Remember the upcoming District art fair, which I mentioned back in July? At that time, none of the District gallerists knew whether they'd sign on—most fearing that it'd be a sure loser. By now, nearly all of them are on board. I've asked a few (not a scientific survey, by any means) why they're doing it and they've all given me the same response: If they to grow* the city's reputation, they need to show up, and so on and so forth.

It sounds to me like paying to be disappointed, but I'm hoping it won't turn out badly for the galleries. I don't think the District is a bad city for art—for all the hemming and hawing and recent gallery closings, it's still a top-tier art destination. If the market's less zippy than it used to be, there are a number of concrete factors that account come into play well before intangibles like aesthetics and appreciation. It's absolutely bad news that Numark's closing because we're losing a great space—the best in the city. But I don't know that that means the market's less zippy than it was in 2001.

Just putting that out there. I'll be mulling it over with "Sweet Child of Mine" on the repeat. Where do we go, where do we go, where do we go-oo-whoa?

Apologies for the use of the transitive "grow" not once but twice. I'm in an economics kind of way today. An Axl Rose, microeconomics mood. Axlnomics = the study of human sway and voice warble.

Posted by Kriston at October 13, 2006 12:10 PM
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