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Crawling with Art

Gallery-hopping Pittsburghers brave the cold

PILLBOX | Selena Beckman-Harned

Last Friday night, local artists and musicians turned downtown Pittsburgh into one enormous gallery. The Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's Gallery Crawl performs this transformation four times a year, leaving every gallery in the Cultural District open late and packing each venue with art, music, people, and spinach dip.

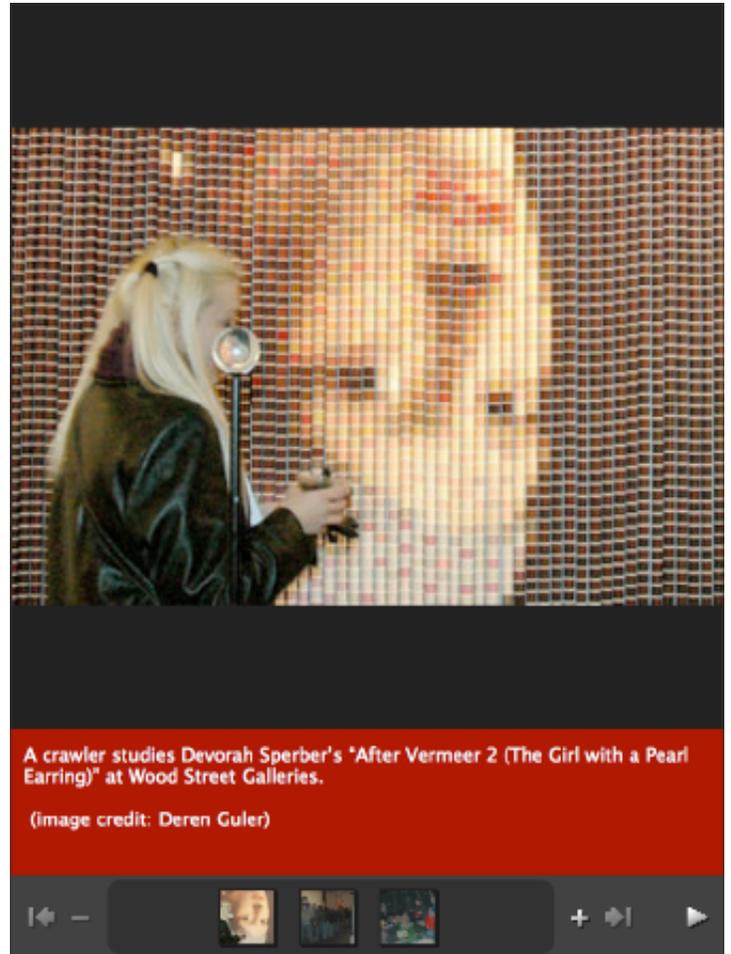
The first Gallery Crawl was held in March 2004, according to a report the Heinz School prepared for the Cultural Trust. Only four galleries participated in the first crawl, but last Friday's event included 15 venues and attracted thousands of spectators. Kathryn Heidemann, a 2004 graduate of the Heinz School and manager of the Cultural Trust's education and community outreach program, explained that the trust's goal is to rejuvenate the downtown arts scene by drawing in repeat customers with free events like the Crawl.

Pittsburghers were certainly drawn in last Friday, braving the snow to mob the galleries downtown. The trek began at CAPA, the Pittsburgh High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. The downstairs gallery featured a photo essay by Lynn Johnson on the 1998 murder of James Byrd Jr. by three white supremacists. The upstairs gallery showcased students' responses to Johnson's exhibit.

Johnson said that she once lost faith in the power of photography to change lives when her show was rejected as too severe. "I'm a believer again," she said, "because I've watched people watch this work."

Around the corner at the Northside Urban Pathways Charter High School, a predominantly African-American steel pan band blew away a multicolored audience. It seemed a more hopeful view of tolerance and diversity than the CAPA show.

Down the street at the Trombino Piano Gallerie, artist Robert Johnston explained his method of stereo realism while the



gallery's owner played a green piano with yellow and orange keys designed by artist Dale Chihuly. Stereo realism stacks two images on top of each other, showing what we see when we're not focusing on something. Johnston, who studied art in France and Italy, explained that the technique is a reaction to the study of realism which art students must follow. One pencil drawing of a homeless man, framed with fragments of cardboard boxes, was particularly arresting; he seemed out of focus, as if someone was glancing at him while walking by.

Immediately upon entering SPACE's Home/Away exhibit, it was obvious this was where all the cool kids were. Home/Away was a psychedelic rave: The centerpiece was a teepee painted with rainbows filled with a howling drum circle. In one corner, Christmas lights spelled out "Just Good Vibes." In another, a film of an LP of Indian music rotated endlessly.

Featuring collaborative installation works by seven artists, Future Tenant was also hopping. Jesse Rye, co-director of the gallery, was impressed by the caliber of the crowd. "Usually they just come for the free beer," he said, "but this time they're here for the beer and the art."

If the success of the Gallery Crawl program is any indication, the art scene in Pittsburgh is going nowhere but up. Gallery owners and artists hope that the event will whet Pittsburghers' appetite for art, bringing them back as regular visitors. As Johnston said, "You have to crawl before you can walk."

The next Gallery Crawl will be held April 20.