

Tour de FABLES

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April 21, 2015

Fourth Arts Block NYC

If you've walked around the East Village recently, you may have noticed some of its walls covered in abstract layouts of Yiddish theaters, faces of famous women, posters designed by Puerto Rican artists, plates full of food, and the architecture of old New York. You may not have known that each of these pieces celebrates the Lower East Side (LES) through a project titled FABLES, a public art series presented by Fourth Arts Block (FABnyc) that explores different elements of LES history.

On a Tuesday evening in July, FABnyc's Director of Public Art, Keith Schweitzer, led a walking tour of the FABLES projects, which were created by five artists and artist teams. Keith explained that each of the artists has a personal connection to the LES, whether it's their birthplace, their place of work, or they have family roots here. The artists were selected in late 2013 from about 200 submissions by a four-person jury and were judged based on their concepts, connections to the neighborhood, and on samples of their previous work. "Feasibility was another criterion," Keith admitted. "Some of the ten semifinalists didn't make the cut because their projects weren't practical given what we were capable of providing."

The tour began at City Lore, where Tamara Gayer's hand-cut vinyl depictions of Yiddish theater marquees grace the glass front of the gallery. Her project, which also includes a similar design outside Italian eatery and bar, L'Apicio, is titled *Who Needs Honey When Sugar is Sweet* (a name taken from a 1930s Yiddish play). Gayer, whose family lived on the LES, worked with commercial-grade vinyl and based her images on her own abstract illustrations of the marquees.



Gayer's mural outside City Lore.

Next, the group visited the Centre-Fuge site, which displayed a mural by Lexi Bella called *Lower East Side Heroines*. The mural features portraits of important, beloved female figures from the LES, like Rosario Dawson, Ellen Stewart (Founder and Director of La Mama), and even Bella's own daughter, Roxy. For Bella, who has lived and worked on the LES, this project became very historically investigative during the months between being chosen to participate, and late April, when the mural went up. "This project," explained Keith, "gave her the opportunity to delve deep" into the lives of these women through her paintings of them. Along the way, she learned about some of the figures she hadn't known about before; most significantly, Stewart, who helped establish the neighborhood as a theatrical arts district and whose portrait became one of the most talked about images. The mural was also praised highly by Dawson, who visited it and was honored by Bella's work. Those of us on the tour were lucky to see the mural then, because it was painted over the next day. However, Bella has created her own website to prolong the life of the piece, which can be found at <http://www.lowereastsideheroines.com/>.



Keith Schweitzer teaching the group about some of Bella's LES heroines, including Debbie Harry and the Russ daughters (Hattie, Ida, and Anne).

The tour then made its way to First Street Green, which hosts two of the FABLES projects, *Posters on the Wall: Our Nuyorican Story* and *Feed Me a Story*. *Posters*, a project curated by Miguel Trelles and Juan Fernando, is a collection of posters created by Puerto Rican artists in New York during the 60's through the 80's. This is the first time these posters, which have until now been housed in an archive at Hunter College, are being displayed publicly. During the decision process, there was a discussion about whether this project, as a curated work, was acceptable within the FABLES guidelines. Keith is certainly glad the jury decided to include it, and considers this project one of FABLES's greatest success stories. "Here was an archive, a collection [of posters] that people have been accumulating," said Keith, "and it was basically just sitting in a basement and the [artworks] weren't on display." The decision to breathe life into this project, Keith believes, is very much in the spirit of the way FABnyc serves as an incubator for the arts on the LES. This is certainly what happened with *Posters*, a project which will likely evolve into a book or public online archive. "We like to inspire a project to develop," says Keith, "to be a launching pad, a testing

ground.”



Some of the Nuyorican posters in First Street Green.

FABLES served as a launching pad for the next two stops on our tour, too. *Feed Me a Story*, a project by Theresa Loong and Laura Nova, is made up of eight photographs of different food dishes set on a red-and-white-checked picnic tablecloth. The large images are bright and mouth-wateringly colorful, and each one is captioned with a person’s name and the name of the dish (e.g. “Mendy’s Cauliflower Latkes”). The foods are clearly ethnically distinct, and the whole display paints a striking portrait of the Lower East Side. Also on the mural is the title of the piece, along with the project’s website (www.feedmeastory.com). Going to the website one can find the recipes for each dish displayed, as well as a video of it being prepared by its cook. The cooks, who the artists worked with at the LES’s LaGuardia Senior Center, share stories of their families and heritages as they make their dishes. It was exciting for everyone that “something talked about in a room in the senior center got shown to the public,” said Keith. The seniors who participated in the *Feed Me* project all came out to see it and had a potluck dinner on the site. “This is the first public iteration [of *Feed Me a Story*],” said Keith, but the project will continue to travel and grow from here.



The dishes of Feed Me a Story.

The tour then made its way to Ideal Glass, an art collective on 2nd Street, where Levan Mindiashvili's mural *Ghost* is on display. Painted on the wall are buildings with architectural elements no longer present on the LES, creating a window-like reflection of a much older New York. "[Because] this is the first time he's done anything of this scale in public," Keith said, Mindiashvili used smaller strips of paper that he painted in his studio and then pieced them together on the wall. As with Bella's mural, Mindiashvili's project "inspired an investigation," with Mindiashvili working with the New York Public Library to research the old architecture of the LES. Though Mindiashvili's work normally speaks about architecture, this was the first time he investigated the architecture of a specific neighborhood. Mindiashvili's work in turn inspired another Ideal Glass artist, John Sully, to create a video response to his work. The video is shown starting at sundown on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, playing until about 11PM.



Mindiashvili's window-like mural outside Ideal Glass.

We ended off our tour with drinks at L'Apicio, whose outer wall is housing the other part of Gayer's project.

Reflecting on FABLES 2014, Keith is very pleased with the project, and proud of its results and of the opportunities it provided for the contributing artists. "We've wanted to do something like this for a long time," said Keith, "but needed the proper funding and host locations." Even once the project was planned, though, "there were a lot of unknowns, and a good amount of faith went into it." The projects greatly evolved from the time the artists were selected to seeing the sketches, "... and the fruits of their work and watching it develop was thrilling." Keith said the outcomes surprised everybody on the upside, but that "given the caliber of the artists that were selected, we had pretty strong confidence that they would do a great job." The success of the project only makes it more likely that FABLES will continue in future years. "We would like to keep going," said Keith, "and provide opportunities of this nature for other [artists] in our neighborhood."