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Upstairs and Behind Doors, Creative Passion

Roberta Smith's Tour of the Sizzlers on the Upper East Side

By ROBERTA SMITH APRIL 3, 2014

THE Upper East Side gallery scene is one of the better-kept secrets in the New York art world, but this may be changing. Recently, the area has acquired some of the buzz that adheres to the Lower East Side, thanks to the volatile gods of New York real estate. With rents rising elsewhere, space along 57th Street and on or just off Madison Avenue, from the 60s to the low 80s, is newly attractive. Among the newcomers: On May 1, Blum & Poe, one of Los Angeles's most prominent galleries, will inaugurate a duplex space at 19 East 66th Street with an exhibition of butterfly paintings by Mark Grotjahn.

Unlike Chelsea's gallery scene, the one uptown is all but invisible from the street, housed mainly in office buildings and discreetly marked brownstones or townhouses. These provide the bonus of architectural diversity, which mirrors the area's artistic diversity. The exhibitions in this selective sampling range from historical material to emerging artists, with galleries here arranged geographically, north to south.

ALEXANDRE GALLERY This East 57th Street gallery examines Loren MacIver's inimitable exploration of light — candle, sun, moon, abstract, none of the above — in works dating from the late 1930s to the early 1980s. MacIver (1909-98) can be uneven, but her best paintings emit a finely calibrated glow. Lavender hazes of snowflakes, sidewalk drawings at night, the Acropolis in white Greek light — her reverent naturalism borders on abstraction. A museum reappraisal is due.

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

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