

ART NOTES

Dallas' New Cultural Landscape: Largest Flea Market In World Channeled in Ambitious Art Spaces

BY PATRICIA MORA
PHOTOGRAPHY MINDY BYRD



09.09.15

Joan Davidow has shows planned through 2022.

The largest flea market in the world has something in common with two new gallery spaces in Dallas — let's call it a revelatory vibe. If you've ever explored the [Paris flea market](#) Les Puces, you'll recall that its spaces are devoted to every kind of arcana, from majolica, astrolabes and German war helmets to postcards and stamps. Wares of every sort flare with the interior landscape of those who deem them fair game for the cultural landscape.

Fast forward to Dallas, where you'll discover that the material shown in pared-down and architecturally chic spaces can be infinitely more elegant than anything in the Parisian market. But the same psychological truism applies: Spaces and their loot boil over in a tableau that reflects the innermost life of gallery owners. The more you know about them, the more irresistibly personable they be-

come. Two new galleries in Dallas are coming to the fore, and they're both atypical and marvelously intriguing. [Joan Davidow](#) and Capera Ryan have each opened a space in the burgeoning area west of Riverside Drive — which, for the directionally challenged, translates as “closest to the levee.”

We are witnessing a perfect storm of deeply talented people doing deeply interesting things in deeply tasteful spaces, as evidenced here. Both Davidow and Ryan are setting land-speed records for hectic enthusiasm. Their personalities are quite different, but their passion for their work billows forth, and their stories are captivating. One is imprinted with a touch of haute bohemia. And the other? Well, it's haute, all right, but with a dollop of Eastern mysticism thrown in for good measure.

JOAN DAVIDOW — SITE 131

At one o'clock on a hot Sunday afternoon, Joan Davidow— one of the most respected doyennes of the Dallas art world — met me outside a construction site on Payne Street. She stood in the heat alongside fencing and piled sand and looked the epitome of the art gallery habitué: dark sunglasses, a simple black dress and just the right amount of bangle. She emitted a fragrance faintly reminiscent of citrus orchards. Compelled to ask what the scent was, I expected to hear the name of something from the trove of Dior or [Hermès](#). She waved her hand and said, “Oh, it's a men's fragrance, so nice and clean.” And so it began.

She threaded her way through a pathway of piled rubble, a few tossed bricks and makeshift lunch setups for workers. “Is it lunchtime?” she inquired casually. This was my initiation into Site 131, an upcoming nonprofit gallery that's the rapidly emerging joint effort of Davidow and her son, Seth.

While she will take the helm in the curatorial department, Seth, an avid collector, will offer aesthetic input. He's also providing entrepreneurial heft and is tremendously keen on working with his mother



on their new and ambitious enterprise. Their closeness is palpably genuine, and one gets the feeling

that Site 131 may have begun as a labor of love but will likely become relevant as a huge win for artists — and the community as a whole. It's all taking place at the west end of a circa-1950 commercial building: 4,500 square feet in total, including a 2,500-square-foot gallery space, plus an entryway and services, designed by [Droese Raney Architecture](#).

Davidow suggested that we go to her loft space near Cedar Springs and Harwood to look at images of work she's planning to show in upcoming exhibitions. This was a plausible suggestion, but nothing could have prepared me for the enthusiasm that blazed forth during a toe-to-toe conversation. She showed me three artists' work slated for her initial foray when the gallery enjoys "a soft opening during this year's Indian summer." Dubbed "Layering," it will showcase Texas artists who, according to Davidow, are under-recognized: Lauren Muggeo, Arthur Peña and Marjorie Schwarz. Davidow wants to continually create exhibitions with artists whose work shows commonality. What makes this brilliant is its tacit understanding that the way we learn things is via juxtaposition and analogy. Allowing artists and their work to mingle and coalesce is ideal; each work will offer a vector and ingress into the next. While this is frequently done, the concept is rarely articulated so deftly — or enthusiastically.

To provide a reference point for Davidow's sprawling imagination, consider this: She already has shows planned through 2022. One exhibition is geared to run in tandem with "Black Pourings" at the [Dallas Museum of Art](#), curator Gavin Delahunty's exploration of Jackson Pollock's black-and-white works. At the risk of being overly enthusiastic, I find the images Davidow has excavated (works by James Buss and Beverly Baker) to be as tantalizing as Pollock's. They come across as explosive psychological missives that are deeply affecting. No doubt about it, the woman has an eye — she was buying Rauschenberg paintings in the '80s — and last fall donated her personal art collection of more than 75 pieces to [UT Dallas](#), with another 75 pieces to be donated over the next two years. She has also had plenty of mentoring from the likes of Howard Rachofsky, for which she expresses deep gratitude.

Davidow carved out a career espousing patrician interests in ways that leave no one feeling uninvited to a party for the privileged. She has a fine, searching mind and still outsprints everyone in sight when it comes to spotting early-comers in the art world. Davidow is the real deal — one of those rare individuals who freely gives knowledge and understands that such largesse never diminishes a teacher. Thus, we sat at a table in her living room, and she explained a technique that she found life changing. "This is called VTS, 'Visual Thinking Strategies,' and it is something Philip Yennawine, the former education director at [MoMA](#), came up with," she says. "You look at works of art and ask three questions: 'What's going on?' 'What do you see that tells you that?' And, finally, 'What else do you see?'" Anxious to experiment, I turned around and said, "Let's do it with this painting!" I pointed toward a work in her collection, Nathan Green's red/blue shift, 2012. We took turns answering the questions, and the piece became more and more interesting, more and more complex and infinitely more compelling. A mere 14-by-11-inch canvas became a world to be dissected, explored and devoured.

Davidow's gallery, a total of 4,500 square feet, will be a public space for enriching discourse, instructing students and, most importantly, introducing serious artwork that Dallas-area residents might otherwise not have opportunities to view. The experience is sure to be splendid.

[This article originally appeared in the September 2015 Dallas edition of *PaperCity Magazine*.]