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Drop the shops and seek out art

Go New York: Going to New York to shop has been consigned to the boom days. Now is the time to seek out the art on offer in the city, writes **EMMA SOMERS**

‘IF YOU TOLD ME I had to live here I’d be dead within the month,’ the Mayo woman behind me in the immigration queue tells her daughter, apropos of nothing. Granted, we’ve been waiting in line at JFK for the best part of two hours, but still it seems unfair to judge the city before making it as far as the baggage hall.

The Irish contingent from the new 5.30pm Aer Lingus flight is thin on the ground among the travellers shuffling towards the freedom of the city. We should be grateful for the half-empty flight (four seats just for me? You shouldn’t have!) and the stunning sunset over the Manhattan skyline as the plane landed. But we’ve made a virtue of complaining by now, and even the small groups of women with “shop till we drop” written all over their faces are less excitable than they might have been a few years previously.

My last visit was in December 2009, a fortnight or so before Christmas, and shopping was a priority.

Helped in my resolve by a begrudging bank balance and a short trip, this time around I vow to steer clear of the stores, replacing Macy’s and shopping in Greenwich Village with Moma and the galleries of the Lower East Side. And wouldn’t you know it, I came home richer in every sense of the word.

WEEKENDS IN THE Lower East Side centre around two of my favourite things: food and art.

There are any number of delightful spots to get brunch in – some quaint, some uber cool, but all jampacked at the weekend. That’s not to advise against waiting for a table, but don’t arrive too hungry, hungover or homicidal.

Buoyed by a glass of bubbly (well, it wouldn’t be brunch otherwise), it’s off to the area around Bowery Street to explore some of the gazillion galleries that have been springing up in the Lower East Side since the financial crash.

With art collectors looking for a cheaper alternative to the more established, expensive and cavernous galleries of Chelsea, these new galleries, and their older neighbourhood counterparts, provide an accessible art experience with intimate rooms at street-level.

Our first stop is Simon Preston Gallery (301 Broome Street). Nestled in the remains of Little Italy, in an old fish warehouse, its unassuming shop front gives little indication that a gallery lies beyond. Sitting in the window is the gallery director, Dubliner Paula Naughton, who moved to the city six months ago. Among other emerging contemporary artists, the gallery represents Irish photographer John Gerrard.



On the day we visit, a show by Josh Tonsfeldt is nearing an end. An at first disparate collection of pieces – the hypnotic video footage of oil rushing into a container; the ghostly prints on the back of photograph paper; the thin slab of plaster with a spray-painted spiderweb; the tyre full of fruit – combine to form a quite haunting narrative, with an open trapdoor in the ceiling on the way out making the entire space echo the container from the looped film.

Having returned to New York after four years living in London, Naughton was amazed at the volume of new galleries that had moved to the Lower East Side. “I feel spoilt,” she says. “There are at least 80 within the 10002 zip code.”

She’s not wrong. It seems that every few hundred metres there’s another space to explore. The nearby Dodge Gallery (15 Rivington Street) is another industrial space, this time on split levels with windows letting in natural light from all around.

Sheila Gallagher’s ghostly *Blue Flocked Mary* – I’m a sucker for a title – is immediately striking.

“She uses smoke to make paintings,” says the gallery’s founder and director Kirsten Dodge. The effect is vaguely disturbing.

Speaking of engaging titles, at the Hendershot Gallery (195 Chrystie Street) around the corner the exhibition is a group show called *Keep Out You Thieving Bastards*. The Lower East Side can get away with this kind of cheek because the galleries are just so friendly and welcoming.

“I usually feel a bit intimidated in galleries,” my New Yorker aunt tells me in hushed tones, “but people are so friendly around here.”

And so we continue to potter contentedly from one art space to the next until we reach the New Museum on Bowery, founded by Marcia Tucket in 1977, although a recent enough addition to the Lower East Side (the museum moved from TriBeCa in 2007). From across the street, the building’s impressive front is reminiscent of one of those pinpoint impression toys you stick your face into.

Inside, the design is just as much fun. Aside from the contemporary art on show (visible from the second you walk in the door), the gift shop has some interesting books and magazines, and the cafe is a surprisingly calm spot for a break after an afternoon’s gallivanting.