

Rinaldi: Spark Gallery's latest exhibition is a reunion — and a memorial — for Colorado's displaced galleries

Artists pushed out of studio and galleries by the gentrification of downtown Denver come together at Spark.

By [Ray Mark Rinaldi](#) Jan 11, 2018, 2:41 pm

Depending on your point of view, “The New Underground” at the Spark Gallery is either a family reunion or a memorial service for the galleries and studio spaces that have been pushed out of the urban core by Denver’s recent, and frequently lamented, gentrification. Any artist who has suffered displacement because of rising real estate prices was invited to contribute work.

The list of places now gone may not be terribly long, but it is undoubtedly significant, and includes several artist co-ops that anchored the visual arts scene here for decades. Edge, Pirate, Ice Cube, Next and other galleries weren’t just showrooms, they were also community centers where hundreds of hard-working artists found their spiritual kin and the sort of candid camaraderie that kept their passions moving forward, and where new talent was nurtured and guided into a tough business.

“The New Underground” is meant to bring these refugees into solidarity and to remind all those Denverites cashing in on their suddenly valuable homes that something was lost in the great economic transition of the 2010s.

It all sounds so sad, and it should. Truly talented people were sent scrambling. Not just good painters, printmakers, sculptors and photographers, but also key figures in the scene, the folks who stick with it and keep the art conversation going at openings and on social media forums.

And yet, “The New Underground” turns out to be a feel-good commemoration in its way. It’s nice to see all of these likable artists from various collectives collected together, a reminder

that Denver's talent bench is deep and its art community isn't really going away, just moving around. The work on the walls is skilled, spirited and affordable.

It is also familiar in both players and styles. Artist Phil Bender, long associated with the former Pirate Gallery in Highland, is represented with his trademark move of recycling found objects into grids of reconsidered delight. Here, he sets 12 colorful and flattened "Chinese Lanterns" into a perfect rectangle, four down and three across. The ordinary objects are elevated but in an unpretentious way; it's pure Bender.

On the other side of the gallery, Susan Berkley shows her richly honed skills in layering, offering up "Pattern #1028." The piece, measuring about 30 inches square, has what appears to be a nearly monochromatic tree in the background, but the scene is obscured in the foreground by horizontal red and yellow stripes, imprecisely applied in columns that turn the scene confusing and dreamlike.

Katie Hoffman, once of the Fresh Art Studio in the Santa Fe Arts District, contributes "Unfinished Catastrophe," one of her timeless takes on formal portraiture. This one appears to combine figures from royalty and high society (and a "Statue of Liberty") into an abstraction that crosses geography and time periods.

There is, in the mix, a bit of this and that. Pure painterly abstraction from Philip Rader, Katherine Johnson, Fred Pichon and Karen Roehl; reconstructed, three-dimensional sculpture from Claudia Voulter, Wynn Reynolds and Jonathan Dow; photo prints from Laura Phelps Rogers; and the assorted ready-made from Julie Jablonski, who covers an upright vacuum cleaner with gesso and places it on a podium for the ghostly "Kill Your Heroes."

There's more good stuff — photos, prints and collage. It's a relatively small show, but there's something, as they say, for everyone.

And it comes together nicely, even if haphazardly. There's no curation here to speak of; not much links the work together beyond the idea that these folks have all been evicted at one point or another. The exhibit doesn't take the next step of examining consequences or assessing blame or exposing the trauma of relocation on artists who incorrectly believed their place in the universe was fixed. Artists can get very attached to their studios and their co-ops, and moving on can't be easy.

The problem, of course, isn't packing and unpacking, it's more about a lack of respect for the contribution that artists make as both creators and urban pioneers venturing into neglected neighborhoods, fixing them up and then getting priced out. The displacement has been swift: All of these galleries were in business two years ago.

Now, the Spark gallery itself — founded in 1979 and the city's oldest co-op — has an uncertain future. The space was owned by benevolent landlord and Denver artist Lawrence Argent, of giant blue bear fame, until he died unexpectedly in October following surgery. His family is now settling his estate and it remains to be seen what happens with the building at 900 Santa Fe Drive.

But what we do learn from "The New Underground" is that life goes on. Edge, Next and Pirate have recently found new homes around the Colfax Avenue corridor in Lakewood. Their operations won't be the same as the good old days in Denver's down-and-out neighborhoods, though the work — and that's what really counts here — will go on.

"The New Underground" continues through Feb. 4 at Spark, 900 Santa Fe Drive. 720-889-2200 or sparkgallery.com. It's free.