

THE GALLERY OWNERS THREE PROFILES

BY JOHN PRESTON

The stereotype of gallery owners portrays them as quietly effeminate men or women who live and, perhaps, toil in a world of elegant refinement and composure. Money should be talked about in whispers, patrons should be treated as honored guests, the owner should have a "certain position" in the community. The actual world of art galleries is a lot more rough and tumble than that. Money, for the survival of the gallery and the survival of the artist, is a prime concern. Agonizing takes place around the pricing of works. Collectors don't just appear on the spot ready to assume their roles as protectors of the national artistic treasure or talent, they need to be cajoled, taught, tutored in the ways and means of fine art.

Take any of the realities of the art gallery world and treble them, and you might be close to the reality of a gay art gallery owner. He's constantly fighting not only the battles of every other gallery proprietor, he's also battling with the society's ignorance about gay art and the gay world's ignorance of the place of art in our community. How the many different owners now at work in America deal with the problems involved differs a great deal. Some of the men involved have created really unique positions for themselves, especially as they deal with unique situations. We've profiled three who, between them, show some of the enormous range of situations a gay gallery owner might have to face.

Rob/Rob Amsterdam Gallery

Three years ago Rob opened his gallery in Amsterdam. It was, and is, the only gay art institution in that city. Rob's existence produced a minor revolution in the art world of Northern Europe. For the first time European artists had a marketplace for the sale — and probably equally important — the display of their work. Many artists, notably Nigel Kent, can trace their ability to survive on their work directly to the willingness of Rob to risk the untried waters of gay art.

The Netherlands actually is a freer society than ours in terms of public acceptance of homosexuality and its place in the larger community. Still, there was



Rob, founder of the Rob Galleries, photograph by Robert Mapplethorpe

some risk involved. On the other hand, the people Rob dealt with from the beginning were more willing and able in the open Dutch context to display work under their own name: Famed choreographer Hans van Manen has had two shows of his homoerotic photography without any problem.

This year, Rob's partner/friend/lover Dai Evans came to the United States and opened the New York branch of the gallery in a Greenwich Village townhouse. The unique position of this showroom is its self-defined task as the agent of cross-fertilization of European and American art. Rob shows American works in Amsterdam, but only European artists in the United States.

The display of the European works

has had a special effect on New York artists. While American artists — and certainly those British artists who use this country as their base — are often the working at the highest level of artistic skill, few of the overtly erotic artists can match the Dutch gallery's clients in terms of combining eroticism and technique.

Rob and Dai are both excited about the unique position of their enterprise, obviously reveling in their part in introducing Americans to Europe and Europeans to America, arranging interviews and hanging special shows.

They, of course, face a special set of troubles that hasn't become quite an issue yet, thanks to some cooperative officials and good luck none of the works have

been seized by the ever vigilant, ever puritanical customs officers of this Land of Liberty.

In a Plain Brown Wrapper

If there are problems involved in setting up a gallery in New York or Amsterdam, can you imagine what it's like in the heartland of the Midwest?

Stuart Wilbur opened the only gay gallery in Chicago last year. There had been previous attempts to open "erotic" galleries in Chicago, but they failed after one or two shows. Wilbur has begun to make a go of In a Plain Brown Wrapper with some significant help in timing and the coming together of some unexpected forces.

Probably the most important factor in his favor has been the support of the faculty and staff of the city's prestigious School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The School was overtly anxious for an outlet for the talent of its gay students, or any students working in fields that would be appreciated by gay buyers. The school's imperative to its students, that they should be willing to experience and express their inner selves in their art, couldn't be accepted unless there was a space for the work to be shown. Wilbur provided that for the students, and the faculty hasn't forgotten his service to their own community.

The arch-conservatism of the straight galleries in Chicago has also helped him. His is the only Chicago gallery that will show Paul Cadmus and other "mainstream" artists whose gay works are usually shown "uptown" in New York. The gay galleries in that city don't get to show many of the most important works, since the larger enterprises preempt

them. But Wilbur is the one outlet in Chicago that can and will show Cadmus' homoerotic pieces. He's been able to mount shows sometimes as prestigious as the usually more successful New York galleries.

And finally, since his is the only gallery in Chicago, and since he's cultivated good relationships with all the New York galleries, he can deal with all the artists that are otherwise divided among the Manhattan competitors.

All three influences — the School of the Art Institute, the access to "uptown" gallery work, and the combining of the resources of the five New York galleries — have combined to make a very questionable enterprise one that now has every chance of success. His unique position also leads to still further acknowledgement. While the New York galleries yearn for any mention — even a slam — in the autocratic, homophobic *New York Sunday Times* Arts and Leisure Section, which has basically ignored them completely, In a Plain Brown Wrapper has received good coverage as a "legitimate" gallery in the Chicago press.

All this may sound good, but the problems in opening a gallery in Chicago still make the risk one of such enormity that Wilbur is constantly surprised at himself. For one thing, the gay galleries in New York have an enormous and wealthy clientele ready-made in the gay ghettos of the Village, SoHo and Chelsea. No such open and willing population has yet surfaced in the Midwest.

The Stoned Wall Galerie

Most of the gay art shown — but by no means all of it — is explicitly male-oriented. While almost every gallery

shows the work of women depicting men, and the Leslie-Lohman Gallery has women's shows that include lesbian or women-identified images with some regularity, still the vast bulk of gay art in New York is homoerotic.

The Stoned Wall Galerie, a successful neighborhood enterprise in New York's Chelsea district, is trying to deal with some of the issues involved in a political sense. No one person in the art world can seem to agree with any other one person about a definition of "Gay Art" — or whether such an animal exists at all. Stoned Wall's taken it further — they reject concepts of gay or lesbian art and are trying to deal with "homophile art." The artificial term harkens back to the early 70's when the gay political movement was trying to devise new schemes for understanding our place in society. The idea of trying to deal with male/female relationships in the gay world may almost seem an anachronism, but the gallery believes that the issues gay and women artists are facing are common enough that attention must be paid jointly.

The vehicle for dealing with the whole interaction between men and women has been the development of a collective of artists based in the gallery — The Gay Enclave. Still developing, the group is a way for the gallery to underline its commitment to new artists; it specializes in showing the work of previously unknowns.

The gallery also acts as the New York base for a wide ranging collection of experimental artists who do have some reputation — whether the homoerotic art of Olaf, or the works of Texas based, highly-regarded collagist John Shown.

THE GALLERIES:

IN A PLAIN BROWN WRAPPER

2943 North Halsted
Chicago, IL 60657
(312) 281-6671
Director/Stuart M. Wilbur
Hours: Thursday-Friday/3-9 pm
Saturday-Sunday/2-7 pm
Shows: Keith Smith, Ed Derwent, Robert Mapplethorpe, group shows

ROBERT SAMUEL GALLERY

795 Broadway
New York, NY 10003
(212) 477-3839
Hours: Tuesday-Saturday/11am-6pm
Shows: Philip Masnick, Tom of Finland, Kas Sable, David Martin, group shows

ROB GALLERY

8a Charles Lane
New York, NY 10045
(212) 675-7319
Director/Dai Evans
Hours: Saturday-Sunday/1-7 pm
Shows: Bill Ward, Nigel Kent, Jean Paul Vroom, Tom of Finland, group shows

ROB-AMSTERDAM

Weteringschans 273
Amsterdam 1017 XJ
Holland
Shows: Nigel Kent, Olaf, Bill Ward, group shows

LESLIE LOHMAN GALLERY

485 Broome Street
New York, NY 10013
(212) 966-7173
Hours: Tuesday-Saturday/1-5 pm
Shows: Hilton Brown, Delmas Howe, group shows

STOMPERS

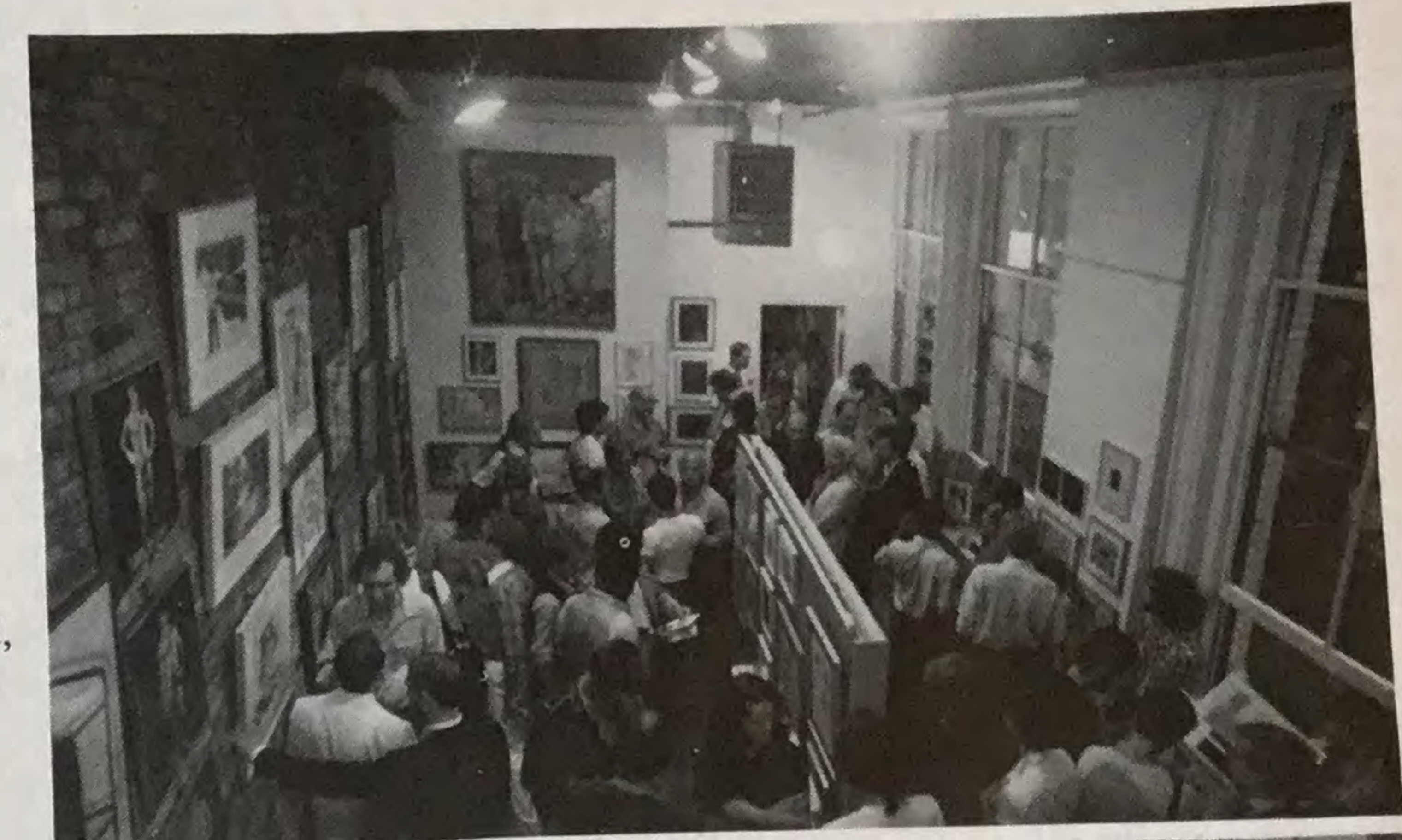
259 West Fourth Street
New York, NY 10014
(212) 691-9571
Hours: Wednesday-Monday/1-7 pm
Shows: Matt, Rex, Brick, Tom of Finland, Etienne

FOTO

492 Broome Street
New York, NY 10013
(212) 952-5612
Shows: Photography only, emphasis on Feminist work

LAWSON DE CELLE GALLERY

3237 Sacramento Street
San Francisco, CA 94115
(415) 931-2558
Director/Edward de Celle
Shows: Robert Mapplethorpe, group shows



The June Group, Leslie-Lohman Gallery

STONED WALL GALERIE

221 West 28th Street
New York, NY 10001
(212) 947-3130
Director/David Logan-Morrow
Hours: Tuesday-Saturday/2-6 pm
Shows: Olaf, John Shown, Wheeler, Debra Marchard, group shows

TYSON GALLERY

2327 Market Street
San Francisco, CA 94114
(415) 431-3098
Director/Bill Mault
Hours: Tuesday-Saturday/12-5 pm
Sunday/1-5 pm
Shows: Wayne Quinn, Frank Betten-court, Richard Roesener, Wayne Flynn, Edward Parente

KORNBLATT GALLERY

326 N. Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21201
Shows: Hilton Brown, group shows

CIRCA GALLERY

9026 Tampa Avenue
Northridge, CA 91324
Shows: Various artists

VISUAL EXPERIENCE GALLERY

759 Ellis Street
San Francisco, CA 94109
(415) 441-1800
Director/Eddie Van
Hours: Noon-7 pm (By appointment)
Shows: Mark Mulleian, Ramon Pablo Vidali, Paul Blake, Robert Arbegast, Wendy Victor, Alex Alexander



In A Plain Brown Wrapper, the major Mid-West gay gallery.

Collage by John Shown from an upcoming show at the Stoned Wall Galerie.

