

Haberdashery Anyone?

June 5th, 2009 by [Mary Cook](#)



179 Canal Street, 2nd Floor. Peepor Place, Dani Leventhal, May 16, 2009. Photo by Margaret Lee on Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/margaret-lee>)

Artists staging their own shows is nothing new. The French Impressionists did it in with the creation of their organization of [Cooperative and Anonymous Association of Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers](#), as did many members of the [Ashcan School](#), as well as [William Blake](#), who held one of his first exhibitions in his brother's [haberdashery!](#)

To all you artists out there, whether you are frustrated now because the gallery that formerly represented you closed, the sales of your work are just overall in a dwindle, or the file of your rejection letters outweigh those of acceptance—whatever you do, it is important to keep up the pace of continual artmaking and participation in the conversation of contemporary art in your community. [Do it yourself!](#)

I had the pleasure of interviewing Margaret Lee, director of a 4-week series of exhibitions called the [Month of May](#) at a former office building located at 179 Canal Street in New York City, as well as with Liam Everett, an artist who curated the third weekend of this month-long program. While neither sought to collaborate on this endeavor as a direct form of protest, Margaret and Liam took it upon themselves to show put together a show with the intention of being able to challenge their own ways of seeing. Here is a peek into their story.

Part 1: An Interview with Margaret Lee

Mary Cook: *I am curious about the process by which you coordinated the program. How did you come across the space at 179 Canal? Are you also an artist in addition to being a curator?*

Margaret Lee: I am an artist and assistant to Cindy Sherman. Cindy rents me an office offsite from her studio, which is my home away from home. I used to have my office in Tribeca, but was forced to move and began renting an office in 179 Canal Street about 2 years ago. It was a very normal commercial building, with a Chinese travel agent and massage parlor. I think there was a painter upstairs and a casting agency.



flash points



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video of the week



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In October 2008, there was a pretty severe fire in the building, on my office floor (which is on the 4th floor). Luckily, all my stuff was safe and unharmed, but the building was closed for months while the landlord waited for his insurance money to begin the cleanup. It took 3 months for the building to reopen. But by then, the recession was in full force and none of the other tenants returned. I began to forge a friendship with my landlord, Francisco Crespo—mostly because I was the only one here. We began to talk about what I did working as an artist, within the art world. He seemed interested and told me point-blank that he wanted to fill the building with artists.

From there, I proposed to him that I would be his real estate agent—pro bono—in exchange for use of the 2nd floor space. I began by throwing parties—one in conjunction with the Swiss Institute and James Fuentes, LLC for the Armory and an after-party for Klaus Von Nichtssagend Gallery. These parties were fun but too difficult. It seemed like a waste of space and energy. This is when I began thinking about hosting weekend shows.

MC: *Do you consider curating as adjunct to your artistic practice?*

ML: A recent project that I have been working on, [Today and Everyday](#), not only addresses the idea of the artist/curator shift, but also the artists selected had practices and professional lives that mirrored the shape of the exhibition. *Today and Everyday* began as a still-life photograph (same title as show) composed of objects taken from larger installations from other artists. I arranged and photographed the works with no feedback. The resulting photograph is my first photographic work to add to my larger body of work. But the group exhibition at X is a chance for the artists involved to exhibit their work in conjunction/contrast to the photograph that will also hang in the space.

MC: *Was it through your work for this project for X that you were inspired to program the series of exhibitions at 179 Canal Street?*

ML: Yes, this is where The Month of May programming began.

MC: *What do you find most important about exhibiting and curating work outside of more traditional venues, such as a museum or a gallery?*

ML: I had access to a space, a raw space but with character that had no affiliations. Being an artist's assistant, gallery worker, art installer—any of these jobs in the art world where you are "support" staff—it is difficult to remove yourself from certain affiliations. Not that this is necessarily negative, but after being Cindy's assistant for almost 6 years, you meet people and talk to those who exist on all levels of the art world; you realize that so many of them do other really interesting things.

MC: *What audiences did you have in mind when coordinating this month-long program?*

ML: I knew that I didn't want to make the month about me, but I wanted to share the space with people I've known—people with tremendous energy for projects and their own artistic practices, despite having full-time jobs with real responsibilities. I wanted to invite these people to curate weekends. I wanted to avoid the normal channels of nepotism. The people I invited to curate were not my closest friends but rather people I've encountered over the years, who span the friend/professional divide. But they were all people I remembered for their work ethic and dedication and people who had the ability to shift their thinking—problem solvers and art lovers. For me, it wasn't so much about what was being shown in the space—curators had FULL CONTROL over what and who they showed—but the energy and exchanged that would occur between artists, organizers, and viewers.

MC: *How do you view your role as director of the Month of May?*

ML: I had bought [Salon to Biennial: Volume 1](#) and was really considering how important it is for artists to mount exhibitions rather than wait for a larger institution to invite them or conceive them. I viewed my only function in The Month of May to be a facilitator of that.

MC: *What kind of considerations did you take into account specifically for each day in which work was exhibited?*

ML: All the people involved LOVE their day jobs and find them really fulfilling. I was not dealing with disgruntled people who wanted to use the space to stage reactionary work.

Josh Klaine, who curated the first show, has worked at [EAI](#) for 5 years and does programming there; he is an artist and a curator as well. Josh put himself and me in the first show, which I thought was a nice gesture. Addressing that in this space, the normal/formal rules didn't apply.

Barbara Corti, Director at [303 Gallery](#)—I wanted to give Barbara a chance to curate something outside a commercial gallery setting, which she had been doing for the last 10 years or so. She follows artists very well and understood the space and brought Annamarie Ho's installation, which fit the space perfectly.

I've known Liam Everett here and there for almost 6 years, and knew him [previously] only as a painter and a very focused artist. He has been doing art handling ever since we met. When he told me about [his performance/theater work](#), I got so excited. This was really a perfect example of how I wanted to use the space. Liam had never staged any of his performative works in NYC ever, despite living and working here for almost a decade. He

told me that he thought he needed to present himself as a painter proper in NYC, because that was the vibe here (which it was for the past couple of years). I was very excited to give Liam the space to not only showcase a part of his practice that he struggled to show in the commercial art world context but also to be a curator and share that with all the other artists that he is in conversation with—those who are part of his larger dialogue as a performer and writer.

[Peter LaBier](#) actually approached me when all of this was forming and point-blank said that we wanted to show his own work. As [he is a] true painter, I encouraged him to do so. I was impressed by his courage to really go against the grain. Mounting your own work—though in the past was normal and customary and was the foundation for modern/contemporary art—is pretty much looked down upon. I thought that within a larger month of programming, it seemed perfectly normal and sincere.

The [Kate Bush Dance Troupe](#) was a nice way to end the month. [Non-dancers, mostly artists](#), interpreting Kate Bush—enough said!

MC: *How did you get the word out there?*

ML: I didn't make a huge PR push for this month. I thought [I would do] just enough to help each weekend curator, but I really wanted it to be word of mouth—friend to friend, keeping it within the community at hand. I wanted the audience to be comprised of people who wanted to be there and wanted to be supportive. I didn't want to create a circus or the next "place to be."

The most important part of curating work outside traditional venues, I think, is that you don't have a reputation or name to support you. Therefore, the people who come to you are really coming to see the work or the programming. Places off the radar offer freedom. And the fact that it is not a commercial gallery further reinforces that freedom. While sales are always a great thing because they allow you to continue making work, they are not the be all and end all. The freedom from the nervousness of being judged by your sales is all refreshing.

* * *

Part 2: Talking with with Liam Everett

MC: *What originally inspired you curate a program at this space at this office space on Canal Street? What do you find most important about exhibiting and curating work outside of more traditional venues, such as museums or galleries?*

Liam Everett: I was anxiously looking for a non-gallery space that could offer an unpredictable condition for my performance. Initially I was drawn to the space at 179 Canal as an anonymous place and/or its potential as a non-space. The content of absence is a central theme to both my painting and performance. The space had an air of hasty abandonment as if the previous tenants had vacated in the course of a day or maybe even hours. Although in this speedy disappearance the eerie residue of labor and the quotidian doldrums were left behind.

MC: *What brought you to choosing Dani Leventhal's work for this exhibition?*

LE: As for the choices I make in my own studio practice—I'm deeply concerned with what is both intimate and emotional. I've known Dani Leventhal for over 15 years. We have collaborated on various projects in the past and her work and ideas have had a profound effect on my own aesthetic development. Her work, as well as Ling-wen's—for lack of better words—moves me in a way that questions my own ideas of behavior and/or humanness...I was convinced that their approach to this empty Canal Street space would become personal, and that the works they would create would be bold enough to invoke the "intimate" in such a potentially vulnerable environment.

MC: *So you are an artist and curator as well.*

LE: With both my studio practice, performance, writing, and curating, I am committed to engaging in what I refer to as the urgency of being. The emphasis is on the preciousness of the immediate and how the body and psyche evolve in direct relation to their ever-changing and highly complex and variable environments. It is important that the work addresses these conditions in a visual language does not dictate.

Because the first act of (the performance) *On the Wall* occurs on the street, therefore entertaining an involuntary audience, my hope was that some of these viewers might be inclined to view the second act, which happens inside the performance space and includes an invited audience. The intention was to blur the line between performer and viewer, as well as the space in which they collide.

Check out a clip:

From now until Sunday June 7th, stay tuned to 179 Canal and a 5-day group exhibition hosted by Margaret Lee and presented by [Common Space](#).

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[...] you saw was just kind of a weeklong show ["Crotalus Atrox (or fat over lean)"]. The curator, Liam Everett, saw my work through an old friend, Noam Rappaport, and asked to see more of my work and invited me [...]

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