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Galleries Shift Shape to Survive in a Changing Art World

By Roberta Smith

Art galleries, like museums, are in a state of flux, determined to find ways to survive and remain relevant in an increasingly hostile environment shaped by rising rents; development; absurd auction prices and a dearth of old-school collectors — ones who think for themselves.

The few that can are shape-shifting and scaling up, becoming more like museums, mounting shows with outside curators and even opening their own bookstores. Many galleries stage not only art performances — by now routine — but also panel discussions and conversations with the artists whose work they sell. As might be expected, these can blur the line between public service and promotion.



TOPLESS The outlier of all outliers here is [Topless](#), billed as “a seasonal art gallery” at 91-02 Rockaway Beach Boulevard (at 91st Street). Now in its third year, Topless is wrest to life each summer by its co-founders and co-directors, Jenni Crain, who works full-time in a Chelsea gallery, and Brent Birnbaum, an artist who lives in the Rockaways. They stage four three-week shows in a rented, quickly refurbished space from mid-June to the end of August. This year’s initial offering centers on [Beverly Semmes](#)’s playfully regal installation: a pathway of large squares of gold velvet adorned with long-sleeve-like loops of dark blue and green velvet, as if flung by a passing Isadora Duncan. The piece is paired with the finely miniaturist, sometimes gold-leafed paintings of families and gardens by [Larissa Bates](#). In plain sight of the summering Rockaways, these works form a separate realm that intimates riches and rituals both ancient and new.

Bless the New York subway system.