

Merge Gallery Brings Affordable Art to Chelsea

by **Steve Weinstein**
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Lustig's paintings are a textual riff on a single-color scheme. (Source: Merge Gallery)

Another gallery opening in Chelsea is about as newsworthy these days as another barn-sized fusion restaurant in the Meatpacking District, but Merge Gallery has managed to stand out from the ever more-crowded pack.

What makes Merge Gallery unique is not only the fact that it is an out-and-proud gay-owned and gay-managed gallery (the fact that that's unique in Chelsea only adds layers to the irony); but that Merge features local homegrown artists-and unlike other galleries, gives them a shot at a Chelsea gallery show rather than going with the tried and true "names."

Located on West 20th Street off Seventh Avenue, Merge is on the outskirts of the West Chelsea gallery district. The affable manager, Cass Zielinski, came to New York with an interest in art. He had worked for his family business back home until he came out, when he had a falling out with them because of their religious beliefs.

Zielinski compares the stretch of Eastern Chelsea where the gallery sits amid a boutique, a police station and apartment buildings, as comparable to certain boroughs of East London, where the art scene has taken root. He and one of the gallery's principals, Ron Brandon, chose the tiny storefront space partly because it wasn't in the thick of the other galleries crowding around the High Line west of Ninth Avenue.

The gallery's latest show features the abstract works of Laura Joy Lustig. The paintings in "Wash, Rinse, Repeat" are as cleansing as the show's title. Each of the paintings riffs on a color and take off from there. It's not surprising that Lustig began as a poet, since the paintings convey a unique textual feel.

The inaugural show at Merge was as close to diametrically opposite in tone to Lustig's as may be possible: Basquiat-like collage paintings of antic figures that recalls Lower East Side graffiti. The next show, Juri Morioka, is almost a synthesis of the other two: quilt-like patterns of a palette of colors.

Such disparity in themes will be hallmark of the Gallery, Zielinski says. As will affordability. He emphasizes that the prices are low (relative to the Chelsea gallery scene). "We're trying to cater to first-time buyers and to get people interested in art," he says.

So far, the gallery is making a good beginning. And, in the process, it's bringing a healthy dose of down-to-earth, unpretentious appreciation to the increasingly overheated Chelsea art scene.