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The Art Scene, Then & Now

By ANNE KADET

The art market craters, the rents keep climbing, but decade after decade, they keep coming: newly minted art school grads. They move to New York because, well, what else is there to do?

Forty years ago, they settled in SoHo and TriBeCa. Now, the scene centers on the Morgan Avenue L stop in Bushwick. The community's a lot bigger, thanks to a sharp increase in university programs churning out MFAs, but newcomers deal with the same challenges: balancing day jobs and studio time, paying the rent, opening galleries when the establishment won't have them.



Deborah Kass, left, and Amy Lincoln at Ms. Kass's studio in the Gowanus section of Brooklyn, where they discussed living in New York as artists.

Still, there's a sense that the artist life circa 2012 is more of a slog than back in the '70s, when you could rent a Manhattan loft on a bartender's salary. Metro Money recently met for coffee with two artists who swapped stories about landing in New York, then and now.

Deborah Kass, 60, moved to the city in 1974. Her bright, oversize paintings, which often feature ironic aphorisms or reference art-world superstars, hang in collections at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney and the Guggenheim. Represented by the Paul Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea, she has a retrospective this fall at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.

Amy Lincoln, 30, lives in Bushwick, where she produces small, acrylic still lifes, portraits and landscapes with a deliberately formal, primitive feel. She's currently showing at the New York Center for Art and Media Studies.

Ms. Lincoln: When I moved here [in 2006], I worked at a private equity firm, Kohlberg Kravis Roberts, that had a kitchen in it—a “Gosford Park” kind of servant thing. I was serving these rich guys breakfast and lunch. I didn't mind being a waitress, but I felt lame about it—I had an MFA and wanted to do something more interesting.

Ms. Kass: Couldn't you have found a boyfriend there instead of in Bushwick? They're your future collectors!

Ms. Lincoln: Now I work for a prop stylist on photo shoots, usually less than 40 hours a week. I make \$200 to \$250 a day, and that's for up to 10 hours.

Ms. Kass: I worked a waitress job at this really butch SoHo hamburger joint, Broome Street Bar. I have great memories. I think I was making \$15,000 to \$19,000 a year, but I could live like a queen on what I made at the bar three nights a week. I had a car, summers in the Hamptons. I had my loft, I walked to work, I had pals, it was fantastic.

Ms. Lincoln: My impression is you didn't have to work as much then.

Ms. Kass: Right! And you didn't move to Brooklyn, you lived in TriBeCa, which wasn't TriBeCa yet. It was this sleepy little town, totally quiet. If there was anyone on the street, you knew them. It was so quiet on Duane Street they'd put out a volleyball net. It was totally dreamy.

I got my place [on lower Broadway] in 1976. It was \$200 a month and then it went up to \$260. It was about 1,150 square feet. It was a great space, and I had a Murphy bed. No one locked their door. We would come and go all the time. I remember staring out the window thinking, “I can't believe this is my life. This is exactly what I wanted.”

Ms. Lincoln: I moved to Bushwick in 2007. My then-boyfriend, now-husband, he and a few friends found this 4,000-square-foot loft space that used to be a factory. There were seven or eight roommates, all of them guys. I had maybe 350 square feet.

It had tin ceilings and paint peeling off. No one cleaned up. There were mice in the kitchen. The fuses were always blowing. It was pretty disgusting, but after a while I didn't see it. Then I'd go home and visit my parents and come back and say, "Oh my god, I hate my life."

We moved to another loft building and got an 800-square-foot space. It's \$1,750, more than before. But we can still go on vacations and out to eat. I hate the term "starving artist."

Ms. Kass: Who doesn't?

Ms. Lincoln: It's condescending. I guess I don't like the stereotype, the bohemian idea. We're definitely very career-oriented. You have to be serious about spending time in the studio. You have no free time. You never have the day off...I know a lot of people who have to work a lot because they're paying off a \$30,000 student loan.

Ms. Kass: I didn't get an MFA. I didn't have a student loan. We expected our parents to pay for college.

Ms. Lincoln: We all got MFAs and the art market was booming. You could get picked up by a gallery at a student show. We had really high expectations.

Now, there is so much angst over, "I want to be showing at such-and-such gallery, and this curator called but then I never heard back...."

Ms. Kass: I didn't have any expectations. What you expected didn't exist yet. This was before young artists became a commodity. In the '70s, there wasn't a market, there was a recession. The same 50 people went to every opening. Art wasn't a career, I just wanted to paint. I moved to New York to become a famous waitress.

Ms. Lincoln: In Chelsea, there's an art market, but there's no access to it. So we created our own scene. It's hard to imagine how you even break into Chelsea. Nobody I know has done it.

I'm selling about one work a month, getting \$300 to \$700. It's about 10% of my income. It helps. I thought I should raise my prices. But there's a limit to what you can charge or it's never going to sell in Bushwick.

Ms. Kass: In the '80s, with Reaganomics, everything started changing. "Dallas" and "Dynasty." Money became very fashionable. It was the tax breaks for the last 30 years that made the art world into what you expected to be a part of. It's the one place where trickle-down economics worked. After I got fired from my job in 1981, I never had to work again.

Ms. Lincoln: Now that is success.

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