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Hidden away, seeking to be found

Scene in/ Seen in... Warsaw

GINANNE BROWNELL

Unlike its counterparts in places like Berlin, Paris or London — where most influential galleries are set up in obvious commercial spaces with large windows displaying what's on view inside — finding the Raster Gallery in Warsaw takes perseverance.

It's not that locating 42 Hoza Street is so hard itself, but trying to figure out where the gallery could be within the run-down Communist apartment block is what proves elusive. Halfway through a darkened corridor leading to a courtyard there is a door with a buzzer for several apartments — and for Raster.

Once inside, it's up three flights of broken and crumbling stairs to finally reach the gallery's wooden front door. Yet it has been behind this less-than-flashy entranceway that Raster (www.raster.art.pl) has established itself as one of Poland's most influential art galleries.

Founded by the art critics Lukasz Gorczyca and Michal Kaczynski in 2001 (they had previously run a well-respected online art magazine by the same name), they are not only credited with putting, among others, Wilhelm Sasnal onto the international stage, but also for helping nurture what has become a thriving art scene in Warsaw.

This autumn the gallery will move to a proper white cube space on street level near Plac Konstytucji — a new twist, since most important galleries in Warsaw followed Raster's lead by establishing themselves in nondescript apartment or office blocks.

"We made it popular, and it's become a sort of Warsaw style," Mr. Gorczyca said. "But it's really for practical purposes because the city owns — or at least owns temporarily — much of the real estate, due to the complications with privatization. They offer to rent these run-down spaces to businesses, but most companies don't want them. However, for a young gallery without a lot of money, it's the easiest and cheapest way to get a space in the city center."

For Raster and others of the some 40 galleries around the city, being hidden away is a bit of a metaphor for the Warsaw art scene as a whole: it takes a bit of searching but once found, there are amazing things to be experienced in private galleries and art spaces across the city.

But Mr. Gorczyca and many of his colleagues within the art world realize that for the gallery scene to develop both locally and internationally, it needs to be more visible.

Several galleries including Raster, Foksal Gallery Foundation (FGF), Kolonie, Lokal_30, Le Guern and Czarna have put together a plan to create a gallery district — or a gallery salon as Mr. Gorczyca called it — to help promote and publicize a bit more of what they



RASTER

have on offer. The idea is that several times a year participating galleries will have openings on the same evening and hold a common party; there will be a Web site and a map of events (there is already one published by the state-owned Zacheta National Gallery of Art, www.zacheta.art.pl/en), and in this way, promote the galleries as a whole.

"We all think it is important to integrate the scene, to make our galleries more visible and stronger," said Jakub Banasiak, the director and founder of Galeria Kolonie (www.galeriakolonie.pl/en), which opened in September and has garnered critical acclaim for several of its shows.

"We also think it could be good for collectors, art critics and, more importantly, for the public, especially those who do not normally participate or feel a part of the art scene."

Although Mr. Banasiak, 30, only recently became a gallery owner, he is no



SUSANA RAAB FOR THE NYT



SZYMON ROGINSKI

Clockwise from top: An opening at Raster, which has become one of Poland's influential galleries. It was founded by Lukasz Gorczyca, left, and Michal Kaczynski, who are helping nurture the art scene in Warsaw.



stranger to the Warsaw art scene. He has a formidable reputation as an art critic and is credited for first dubbing a generation of young painters, including Jakub Julian Ziolkowski and Tomasz Kowalski (who has a retrospective at

Warsaw's Center for Contemporary Art through April), as the "new surrealists" because of their use of vibrant colors and disturbing dreamlike images.

Mr. Banasiak focuses on representing several young artists — including Norman Leto and Katarzyna Przewzawska — many of whom he studied with at the city's Academy of Fine Arts.

"It is very exciting to be a part of the Warsaw scene, which is small but strong," said Mr. Banasiak, sitting at his desk, surrounded by bubble-wrapped canvases. "But the most im-

portant question that new galleries like mine must answer is how to make our style different and unique from the legacy of galleries like Raster and FGF."

Like Raster and FGF, which was the first Warsaw gallery to exhibit at international art fairs like Art Basel and represent big-name Polish artists like Miroslaw Balka, Pawel Althamer and Piotr Uklanski, Kolonie and most other galleries in Warsaw work not only as private galleries but also partially as public foundations. Kolonie, for example, prints books (under its publishing name 40,000 Painters Publishing) with financing from the government, on subjects like historic Polish book covers or the artistic history of the city of Tarnow.

"In Western Europe the scene is already divided between commercial galleries who represent artists and work for the art market, and, then on the other hand, you have public institutions," said Hanna Wroblewska, the recently appointed new director of Zacheta. "Here in Warsaw everything is a little bit mixed."

That mix happened during the late 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century when public institutions like museums did not have enough money for

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Warsaw galleries join forces

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more experimental programming.

"At the time there was no art market here, so these private commercial galleries were not created to make money but created because art critics and artists needed new institutions and to find new audiences," Ms. Wroblewska said. "Warsaw's art scene took what was best of this institutional crisis."

There is still a culture within the private gallery scene to create exhibitions and shows that would usually, in the West, be more likely done by public institutions and noncommercial galleries. Though Polish laws are changing, in the past private galleries could not get public grants to attend things like international art fairs, so galleries set up a public arm to promote Polish art abroad.

"There is a feeling among private galleries, still, that they are doing something that is idealistic," Mr. Gorczyca said. "I think you do not get many galleries who say, 'I am doing this as a business. I am doing this to become rich, for my artists to become rich, it is only about the money.'"

Besides the commercial galleries and public institutions, private individuals are working to propel the arts scene in Warsaw, setting up initiatives including small foundations and exhibition spaces like Chodna 25 and Klubokawiarnia,

"I think what makes us unique is that we do not have a hierarchy in the art world here," said Bogna Swiatkowska, the director of the Bec Zmiana Foundation, which publishes books on art and design and organizes artistic projects. "People, enthusiasts, are taking responsibility into their own hands and we can help influence this cultural life of our city."