

A Gallery Atypical to Its End



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Tom Beale works on a wood sculpture in his studio in Honey Space. More Photos >

By RANDY KENNEDY
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How long can an art gallery that has no regular hours, no staff, no windows, no air-conditioning and — perhaps more relevant to the question at hand — pays no rent remain open in the heart of Chelsea, one block from behemoths like the Pace Gallery and Gagosian?

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The Last Days of Honey Space

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The answer in today's art world, with today's High Line-spiked Chelsea real estate prices, should be that such a place does not have the slightest possibility of existing. But the correct answer, as it turns out, is 4 years 7 months 15 days, give or take a hiatus or two, and counting on everything going well until the end of September.

That is when Honey Space, one of the city's strangest art establishments, will officially be no more, ending what Tom Beale, a sculptor who opened the space in February 2008 in a ramshackle warehouse along the West Side Highway, liked to describe as an artist-run, unattended no-profit gallery (nonprofit being far too formal), the kind that otherwise hasn't existed in Manhattan for decades.

Mr. Beale moved into the building from Bushwick, Brooklyn, in 2007 — swimming against the tide of most

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young artists looking for affordable space — when the four-story warehouse was opened as an experimental artists' cooperative called Emergency Arts. That plan fell apart. But Mr. Beale stayed on, earning a free ground-floor studio space by serving as the building's carpenter, salvage man, plumber and all-around concierge after [Alf Naman](#), a developer who controls the property, hatched a plan to make the building temporarily into a rough-hewn event space with inexpensive rental studios for artists.

"When I first came in, they told me, 'Just go tape off your space,' " Mr. Beale, now 34, recalled. "And so I took this ridiculous amount of space for myself, right on the street in Chelsea, which I didn't deserve at all. And I knew that somebody was going to figure it out pretty soon and take it back."

But then, in the summer of 2008, a funny thing happened: The economy fell off the cliff, and plans for demolishing the warehouse to develop the site commercially went onto a slow track. [The building](#), on West 21st Street, quickly filled up with artists — some well known, like Iona Rozeal Brown and the street artist Swoon — and became a kind of creaky, dusty small town, with a town square in the form of a second-floor kitchen and dining hall that Mr. Beale fitted out with scrap lumber he scavenged from the building and the streets.

With so much room on the ground floor, Mr. Beale said, he decided he would regret it for the rest of his life if he didn't try to turn at least part of it into a gallery space for young artists he liked.

So in the winter of 2008, with not much more than drywall and money of his own to upgrade the electricity, he opened [his first show](#), of paintings on Masonite by Adam Stanforth, a friend. The space had no sign and, through its existence, usually no door, except for a roll-up security gate that went up in the morning and down at night. One morning shortly after the opening, it was so cold inside the gallery that a reporter's fingers froze up, and he had trouble taking notes.

Just off the gallery was a crumbling old kitchen and, hidden past it, a darkened, '70s-inflected grotto and underground swimming pool, long dry. (Some thought the grotto was what remained of a sex club or a Mafia hangout.) The gallery's existence was never better than precarious. Mr. Naman told Mr. Beale several times that he would have to vacate the space. "I always listened to the tense of his words rather than the meaning: 'You will have to leave.' At some point, but not this minute," Mr. Beale recalled in the building last week, eating lunch with Mr. Naman, who smiled intently and said little.

Mr. Beale continued to put on shows, which never got much attention in the art press but drew admiring crowds. Swoon created [a work in a rubble-filled hole](#) beneath the gallery's floor, a paper portrait of a 17-year-old girl murdered in Juárez, Mexico, in 1995. (The portrait, eerily eroded by moisture and mold, is still inside the hole, whose entrance is now concealed by a large metal plate.)

Tora Lopez and Rya Kleinpeter staged a surreal participatory [burlesque performance](#). John Wells, an eccentric painter who came to have a studio in the building after years of wanderings through other unconventional working locales — the Chelsea Hotel, for one — did [a show of scroll paintings](#) in 2009 that remained up for months, most days with no one supervising the space.

"The only thing that was stolen was a pot of marigolds," Mr. Wells, who has also served as the building's resident chef, said proudly.

Over the recent lunch, which Mr. Wells cooked ("Our last suppers," he intoned gravely), Mr. Beale said he still had not made up his mind where he will go or what he will do after the building is vacated on Sept. 30, to prepare for demolition and an eventual residential development. He said he hoped he would be able to have one last show, of his own work, before the end, but permission has not been forthcoming.

"Basically," he said, "we're all about to have a pretty rude awakening."

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Mr. Wells added, "We try hard not to think about it."

Ms. Lopez completed the thought: "We're in total denial."

Mr. Beale never envisioned himself running a gallery, he said, and if he ever does again, it will most certainly not be in Chelsea. "Just because of where we were, that this crazy thing happened here, it became a kind of artwork unto itself," he said. "It lasted longer than any of us thought it would."

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