



Own This City

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I'm Officially Obsessed

By Melissa Stern

A box factory that was built in 1900 along the Gowanus Canal seems an unlikely place to celebrate the Age of Enlightenment. But at [Observatory](#) (543 Union St between Bond and Nevins Sts, Gowanus, Brooklyn; [observatoryroom.org](#). Thu, Fri 3–6pm; Sat, Sun noon–6pm; free), enlightenment occurs on a regular basis. The gallery and event space was founded in February 2009 by a group of seven artists who aim to transport visitors back in time. “[The space is] inspired by the 18th-century notion of ‘rational amusement,’?” explains cofounder Joanna Ebenstein. It’s also part of a broader artistic renaissance that has transformed the area around the Gowanus Canal from a toxic wasteland to a budding home for urban pioneers: Observatory shares a home with other eclectic groups, including the Museum of Matches and Proteus Gowanus.

The idea for Observatory grew out of two earlier exhibits curated by Ebenstein and artist James Walsh; “Arcane Media,” one of the projects, showed off antiquated methods of capturing images on film. After the success of those shows, they gathered together like-minded partners to form Observatory. The group’s mandate is to be a home for “kindred geeks,” says cocurator Pam Grossman. Each of Observatory’s members curates one show per year that features their own work, or that of artists with a similar archaic bent. The current exhibit, “The Secret Museum” (through Sunday 6), was assembled by Ebenstein and features images of odd items from museums across the globe.

But what’s most notable about Observatory is its lectures: If you have a hankering to learn about poisons or how to preserve plants, this is the place to be. The events are alike in that they occupy the intersection of history, science and art. The Observatory celebrates the eccentric and nurtures the curious; its oddities delight the eye as well as the mind.

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