

Ken Okiishi

Gino / Marcel Duchamp on Streeteasy.com

09.02.12 - 17.03.12

Michael Sanchez has decided to stop writing press releases, so I guess we will have to write our own. There will be umbrellas and they will be spinning.

You may have seen this before at the art fair or on the internet. The presentation of the spinning umbrellas at Mathew* distills, like an email attachment or annoying gif animation, an essential quality that was perhaps lost in the manufactured glee of the art fair:

This is a plane of trauma that appears as if it could appear anywhere, any time.

Please note:

There may or may not be a performance of Pina Bausch's seminal dance work, Cafe Bravo.

One of the walls of the gallery will be painted in Chroma Green (which can be "knocked out" in digital video editing quite easily). If you would like to use this location for filming, please email the gallery at info@mathew-gal.de.

Streeteasy.com is a real estate meta-search engine, much like the Berlin favorite, Immobilienscout.de. The screen-shots on view in the gallery are recent real estate ads for a studio that Marcel Duchamp lived and worked in on Manhattan's Upper West Side from 1915 to 1918 in exchange for The Large Glass. That may have seemed like a good deal to him at the time, but it wasn't. You probably won't recognize the apartment from the hand-colored photographs included in the Boîte-en-valise. Photoshop offers hand-coloring possibilities that perfectly emulate the types of weird stains you used to get when the chemicals weren't mixed properly. Photoshop also offers possibilities beyond this.

MD's tiny "artist's studio" was in the back of the building, and the collectors who paid his rent lived in a lavish apartment in the front**: the building, called "The Atelier," had been developed with this sort of fantasia in mind. Artists more financially minded than Duchamp had been developing an entire block of buildings with artists studios on the back and deluxe accommodations on the front, and a few of these artist-developers became quite wealthy selling these lifestyle apartments. Duchamp's letters at the time contain affects that remind us of our lives now, as we also find ourselves, running out of plausible options, stuck in some alien bourgeois subjectivity: "The Picabias are in the catskills"; "I am extremely sorry, after having promised to help you decorate the tea room, to have to withdraw my promise"; and, of a fallout from socializing with artists and collectors, "it has probably been engineered that way by spiteful people." While living there, one evening in 1916 at "Cafe Des Artistes" down the block, MD tried to explain his developing notion of the readymade; perhaps out of frustration, he sprung from the table and signed an "old-fashioned" painting of a battleground that decorated the wall of the cafe, and declared it readymade.

This may have been the worst artwork MD ever made.

Here we go again, on the battleground, stuck in a feedback loop, spinning.

*This may or may not be misrecognized on this lovely West-Berlin street as a new home decorating store, Chateau Jalousie.

**In case you are interested, this lavish apartment is currently back on the market. After the Arensbergs, the restaurateur, George Lang, who made Cafe Des Artistes iconic in the 1980s, lived there. It is his renovation that could be yours:

<http://streeteasy.com/nyc/sale/637528-coop-33-west-67th-street-lincoln-square-new-york>

"The Picabias are in the catskills."

Mathew

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Hours: Thu - Sat / 13 - 18 & by Appointment

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List of Exhibited Works

Gino / Marcel Duchamp on Streeteasy.com

2011

inkjet-prints on Pictorico Pro hi-gloss white film, silkscreened zebra-print wallpaper and zebra-print umbrellas by Scalamandre, motors, electrical cords

Dimensions Variable

Marcel Duchamp on Streeteasy.com (dust breeding)

2011

inkjet-prints on Pictorico Pro hi-gloss white film

38,5 x 45,4 cm

Edition: 5 + 2AP

Marcel Duchamp on Streeteasy.com

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38,5 x 45,4 cm

Edition: 5 + 2 AP

Marcel Duchamp on Streeteasy.com (the Picabias are in the catskills.)

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inkjet-prints on Pictorico Pro hi-gloss white film

38,5 x 45,4 cm

Edition: 5 + 2 AP

Marcel Duchamp on Streeteasy.com (the view may have been different)

2011

inkjet-prints on Pictorico Pro hi-gloss white film

38,5 x 45,4 cm

Edition: 5 + 2 AP

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That's Italian!

Food like Mama's (and how about those zebras?) makes Gino a New York institution. Anthony Haden-Guest savors the flavor. **By ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST Photographed by ROE ETHRIDGE**

Karen Blixen, the Danish writer who was known as Isak Dinesen and who lived on a Kenyan ranch, compared big cities to the wild. That is surely true of New York, a town where restaurants, bars, clubs -- and sometimes the people who frequent them -- sprout, bloom and rot as if they were life forms in a sped-up nature movie. But for that very reason, New Yorkers also harbor longings for stability -- and respect for the survivors.

Among these, Gino, the Italian restaurant on Lexington Avenue near 61st Street, is up there with the hardest. This, despite the fact that Gino refuses to countenance either credit cards or reservations. And, of course, there are the zebras. As to these -- well, whoa! Gino is a restaurant, not a picture gallery. We will get to the zebras later.



Gino, a Manhattan gastronomic icon, is celebrated for its segreto (secret) sauce, its veal and peppers and its zebras -- on the walls, not the menu.

Some regulars, first. "You can take your kids," says Jerry Lauren, who is in charge of men's design for Polo Ralph Lauren, his brother's company. "It's unpretentious, although several people are there constantly. I don't want to drop any names, but I bump into Mike Wallace there. Ed Sullivan used to go there as a steady, and going further back, which preceded my day, Fred Allen was a regular. Frank Sinatra used to pop in every once in a while. I've even seen Gregory Peck in there."

He adds, "As long as they're alive, they're there."

Anthony Haden-Guest is now completing a book, "Famous:

Some Journeys Through Celebrity Worlds."

Michael Batterberry, the editor of Food Arts magazine, observes: "I love the way that so many of the old dishes are still on the menu. They used to seem commonplace but now they have a nostalgic, almost exotic ring. It really is a time-line menu -- liver and onions, kidneys, the organ meats."

Neil Cooper, who owns the independent punkish music label ROIR, has been going to Gino since 1954. "And everything's exactly the

same," Cooper says.

Gino has other characteristics of botes where many patrons are known to one another, at least by sight, and where the sober-sided mingle with more colorful characters. (Was it Jean Cocteau who said that if a restaurant could dream, it would dream of being a theater?) Lord White, a debonair British magnate, was often seen in Gino when he was putting together some buccaneering deal, as was Johnny Meyer, who had been the secretive factotum of both Howard Hughes and Aristotle Onassis. It is without astonishment that you learn that Woody Allen shot a scene in Gino. I mean he had to, didn't he? (It's in "Mighty Aphrodite.")

"I have memories of wonderful trysts there," the Manhattan socialite Jan Cushing Amory notes. "I have memories of Gino's dating back to when my son John, who is now 19, was 2, and he used to try to paint the zebras with his crayons."



Right. The zebras.

Gino Circiello, for whom the restaurant was named, and Guy Avventuriero, his partner in founding it, both came from Capri.

"They had a house next to the wonderful hotel there -- up on the hill," recalls Edwin Ward Bitter, then a salesman for Franco Scalamandr , who owned the fabric and wallpaper business that bore his name and that still has its mill in Long Island City and a showroom on Third Avenue. And when Circiello and Avventuriero "got off the boat, they went to see Mr. Scalamandr ," says Bitter, who is also married to Scalamandr 's daughter, Adriana. "He was a wonderful man for helping Italians get started. Particularly southern Italians."

Circiello and Avventuriero hoped to open a restaurant. They had some capital, but not enough. Scalamandr , born in Naples himself, put up the rest. They found their space and opened Gino in 1945.

It was, and is, without pretension, in the shape of a shoe box, with hot-water pipes standing away from the wall. Decorating it was a problem -- the war was not yet over, and there were stern restrictions on expenses.

"Flora Scalamandr  designed the wallpaper," Bitter says, referring to his mother-in-law, whom he recalls as "a wonderful woman."

Yes, the zebras.

Two explanations have been suggested for the choice of motif. Both are correct. "I chose it because I love to hunt," Circiello says, "and it is something that people will remember."



The bartender Bill McCarthy Jr. fixing a drink under the watchful eye of Mario Laviano, one of three partners who now run Gino.

It was also very much of its period. "Zebras were very hot in those days," Bitter says. "Zebras were very swish, very stylish. Mr. Scalamandre had the design approved by Guy and Gino, and he had the screens cut."

The zebra-printed wallpaper duly went up. The zebras romp in a shower of spidery arrows over a veldt the color of a strawberry, a raw beefsteak, a Bloody Mary -- a deep blush.

Thanks, in part, to the zebras, Gino fitted snugly into a fine -- but now, unhappily, moribund -- American tradition. You could call it Commercial Dada. These days when a restaurant achieves a knockout look -- like Sirio Maccioni's Cirque 2000 or Keith McNally's Pastis -- you know that whopping amounts of design energy have been expended on getting things just so. Commercial Dada, which is more haphazard, is another story.

The zebras aside, Gino has a matter-of-fact look. The floor is speckled linoleum, and the ceiling is acoustic tile. There are artificial flowers around the light fittings, and there's a big Neapolitan Pulcinella behind the bar.

No wonder so many Gino customers come from the D. & D. Building: it's relaxing.

The zebras endure, but it was a close call. About 30 years ago, a kitchen fire destroyed much of the wallpaper. Several patrons, shocked by the notion that it might be replaced, heated up the telephone lines. Circiello acquiesced.

They had to be ready for the reopening, Bitter says. "I was the salesman for that



A carved scone with artificial flowers (Gino is famously unpretentious) against the back wall

territory," he recalls, "so it was my job to get it done. Well, the things came in. And there was a mistake on one of the screens." Indeed. The smaller zebra is missing a stripe on its rear end.

"The zebra looks like its pajamas are falling down," Bitter says. "But they had to go ahead with it. There was a deadline."

Gino reopened. Some of the regulars are certain to this day that -- perfection believed to be bad luck -- the stripe had been left out on purpose.

In 1985, Circiello retired. Gino is now run by three partners -- Mario Laviano, Michael Miele and Salvatore Doria -- all Neapolitans who had worked there.

"Seven or eight years ago, Mario said, 'Why don't you guys make us a tie?' "Jerry Lauren says. "We made the bow tie. I think we made one regular four-in-hand for the bartender. We gave a few to the owners, and every once in a while they would wear them. And I gave them to a few friends."

One final zebra story. I have



told it before, but I make no apologies for repeating it. A woman was lunching there with her infuriatingly inquisitive daughter and a (maybe) lover. "Go and count the zebras, darling," the woman finally begged the girl. She bribed her with a prize.



A gathering of regulars for lunch.

The little girl was back, presto. "Three hundred and sixty-five and a half," she announced.

Implausible? Yes. But who was going to bother to check it out?

Incidentally, some years after the fire, the wallpaper was replaced yet again, and will be replaced again. Whenever necessary, in fact -- the restaurant now owns the silk-screen patterns. The smaller zebra still looks as if its pants are falling down. So? If it's not broke, why fix it? There has to be a Neapolitan equivalent for that.

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ON SITE

Fancy Feast

KEN OKIISHI ON THE LEOPARD AT DES ARTISTES

PART OF THE AESTHETIC SINGULARITY of dining uptown, until very recently, included zebras prancing on bright red wallpaper, drop ceilings with weird stains, dirty pink carpets and matching tablecloths, fake flowers mixed with real ones, that weird moldy smell, bartenders who were probably actually vampires, a very large display of fresh but unremarkable supermarket vegetables in a basically empty restaurant, and extraordinary prices for terrible food. All of this seemed like it would soon be over when New York's Café des Artistes (located, since it opened in 1917, at One West Sixty-Seventh Street) closed in 2009, followed by Gino (2010), Elaine's (2011), and, the most macabre of them all, Bravo Gianni (2011). For those of us from a generation that thinks it is a culinary revolution to track the itinerary of produce, these realms of freaky food and forgotten decor were as riveting as they were revolting, and the perverse glee felt when entering the private realm of our wealthy, geriatric style icons—of the unknowingly antihip—made us feel alive.

These places offered opportunities to digest our cinematic nostalgia with distaste and delicious laughter, so the news that Café des Artistes was going to be resurrected piqued interest in a way similar to catching wind that a forgotten artist is about to have a big comeback (Gasp! Really?). Would it be awful, wonderful, or, even better, a marvelous disaster?

Would it be everyday Italian? was not the first thought to come to mind, and the current renovation does much to erase middling aesthetic questions. This glistening

At first I find the restaurant's blahmbiance charming—a semi-nostalgic rendering of a possible future New York. And then our food arrives.

new restaurant, the Leopard at des Artistes, adheres dutifully to contemporary notions of "modern" good taste: The churchiness of the dark, wood-paneled room has been painstakingly lightened; most of the original Tudor-style detailing has been surgically excised and the rest covered with either white paint, drywall, or touches of unadorned walnut paneling. The floor is now terrazzo, with classic modernist circular metal inlays, and

the old seating has been replaced with Thonet Era Round Armchairs (available at your nearest Design Within Reach). At first I find this blahmbiance charming, like stepping into a virtual, seminostalgic rendering of a possible future New York—one where we don't cling to our secret spots so vehemently and where we are open to general pleasantness. And then our food arrives.

Dinner starts off nicely enough, with a *primo piatto* of pasta prepared as perfectly as the beloved Howard Chandler Christy murals have been restored. Crisp, clean, flawlessly buffed kirsch. But with the main course, the renovation's weaknesses grow more palpable. My dining partner receives an acceptable though unremarkable grilled chicken, served with a vaguely creative corn relish; my *poechetta*, on the other hand, is shockingly dry and has the kind of gravy I have grown accustomed to in old-school restaurants worldwide—the kind of gravy that almost instantly develops a gloppy, gelatinous crust. (Whether the persistence of this phenomenon is attributable to mistiming in the kitchen or some sort of weird wasp thing, I've never been able to figure out.) This dip into the more arcane eating habits of those ossified by pretense immediately brings the Leopard at des Artistes into competition with the late *grandes dames* of spooky cuisine. Granted, the restaurant's name is eccentric enough to warrant some praise. But, as my distressed taste buds prompted my eyes to register gruesome detail everywhere, my dining partner, also unhappy with our banal experience so far, said, "You could also say the place looks a bit like a pizza parlor trying to be fancy."

Strangely, the Leopard's souped-up bland chic makes the Christy murals (1934 and 1942) look out of place; strange, indeed, since we know that the restaurant was painstakingly renovated around them. The overwhelming design nonidentity of the new interior surrounding the



From top: Interior views of Café des Artistes, New York, ca. 1984. Photos: Mick Hales. Interior of the Leopard at des Artistes, New York, 2011. Photo: Melissa Horn.

murals stages a disjunction in eras that wobbles between novelty and lifelessness—it is utterly unclear which set of nostalgic frameworks you are to bring to this place and which fantasies you are supposed to leave behind. That the murals hark back to the friskier days of the Upper West Side seems to have been completely eclipsed.

A listing from the *New York Times* in 1919, two years after the Hotel des Artistes (the cooperative apartment building that housed the café and that, while never a real hotel, featured comparable amenities and staff) was completed, captures the spirit of that forgotten scene:

Fifty New York artists are to give a ball on Friday next, the eve of Washington's Birthday, at the Hotel des Artistes, the entertainment including a "A Dream of Fair Women," in which models for Howard Chandler Christy... and others, will pose. Another feature will be hoops of paper upon which six artists will draw sketches of leading actresses, each drawing to be



Howard Chandler Christy in his studio during the filming of a newsreel, *Hotel des Artistes*, New York, ca. 1924.
Photo: Howard Chandler Christy Papers, Skillman Library, Lafayette College.

destroyed by the actress herself, who will step through the hoop. In a large tank, fed from the hotel's swimming pool, Madeline Gildersleeve will appear in a water fantasy, "The Fountain of Youth."

One of the restaurant's frothiest panels bears the same title as this wet and wild *tableau vivant*: Christy's *The Fountain of Youth* features naked women cavorting in what looks more like a wading pool than a mythic pond. In fact, the historical details surrounding the production of the entire set of decorative paintings may help to explain why the nymphs seem so folksy, so real, so much more like models performing for an audience than mythological creatures discovering the mysteries of nature.

Howard Chandler Christy, who was one of the first people to buy an apartment in the building and who lived there until his death in 1952 at the age of 79, is most notable as an illustrator (he created the "Christy Girl") and also as the judge of the first Miss America pageant. In many ways, he typified the kind of visual artists who lived in the Hotel des Artistes when it was first built—those working in kooky simulations of nineteenth-century academic tropes, equally at home producing "fine art" paintings, *Life* magazine covers, or illustrations for US war propaganda. In fact, the entire block had been developed by establishment artists who had realized that, by banding together financially, they could not only build "dream homes" for themselves but also, with their bohemian cachet, make a profit. According to the *New York Times*, the 1920 census listed the initial occupants of the Hotel des Artistes as fourteen artists, musicians, or writers; eleven actors or movie

executives; twenty-two stockbrokers, engineers, or other businesspeople; and twenty-six household servants.

One notable exception is Marcel Duchamp, who lived there from 1915 to 1918. He had been brought to the "artists' block" by collectors Louise and Walter Arensberg, who lived in a lavish apartment in a building called the *Atelier*, a few doors down from the Hotel des Artistes, and paid for the artist to live and work in a small studio in their building in exchange for the *Large Glass*, 1915–23. The Arensberg home was a legendary meeting point for the Paris and New York avant-gardes, or, as Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia described it, "an inconceivable orgy of sexuality, jazz and alcohol." This is the period during which the readymade was coming into being, and Café des Artistes was not an insignificant backdrop to that development. Before the current murals, other paintings by Christy decorated the walls, in particular a "huge old-fashioned painting" of a battle-ground, as Duchamp later recalled in an interview with Dore Ashton in the late 1960s. The artist went on to tell how, one evening in 1916, he "jumped up and signed" the grand *tableau*, thereby creating "a ready-made which had everything except taste. And no system." Some years later, *The Battle Scene* (readymade) disappeared under a new Christy painting featuring the frolicking, naked nymphs that undress the walls today.

As the original residents started to pass away in the 1950s, the hotel's largest communal spaces—including its theater and ballroom, where such memorably frilly parties had once been thrown—were leased to commercial tenants (ABC used the ballroom as a television

studio). But the original concept of a "hotel for artists" had already begun to fade in other ways. One of the most spectacular original amenities—an arrangement in which residents could supply the kitchen with ingredients and then receive their "food cooked free," delivered directly into their apartments via electronic dumbwaiters—had been discontinued early on.

In 1975, the remnants of the original kitchen and café space at the front of the building were taken over by restaurateur extraordinaire George Lang, and it is his renovation of Café des Artistes that most of us call to mind when thinking of the "original" today. Reviews at the time, like reviews of the newly opened iteration, tended to focus on the rejuvenated murals, the face-lift aspect, the "reborn classic." But if this venue was already a nostalgia production in 1975—described by journalistic gems such as "Very pink within their very green copies, like peppermint mousse on beds of spinach, [the mural girls] were daring in their youth and are touchingly innocent in their reincarnation"—the tone this summer was quite different. Reviewers now celebrated the "extensive cleaning," the pedigree of the new restaurateurs (Gianfranco and Paula Bolla Soerentino), the celebrity clientele, the "particular subset of Manhattan society" that reserves its tables nightly—the positionings that make this place "a hit."

In a city where geographies of consumption currently have more to do with the fickleness of Google's PageRank algorithm and endless feedback loops of social media than where we physically live, we have all become tourists of each other's neighborhoods. That this effect could be felt less dramatically in parts of the city with large swaths of very elderly populations—in the land the Internet forgot—was a glitch in the system that I had naively hoped would remain unnoticed and unrepaired. The current version of Café des Artistes (the Leopard @) is what happens when dynamos of yesteryear die, and I hope it is not a blueprint for what's to come. I would much rather take a cab to the Seagram Building's Brasserie and reflect on the "new" Lincoln Center through the lens of "How quaint early-2000s surveillance chic has become?" In some ways, Diller + Scofidio's Y2K take on Brasserie is a model of "renovation"—a destruction of the original that thinks about the past but does not represent or attempt to preserve it; that creates something that can age in unexpected ways for another eighty years. Something that can develop a completely unforced, nostalgic patina.

But where, then, do we go when we happen to crave that special uptown frisson of dying decor and pricey fare? Luckily, there's always Shun Lee. □

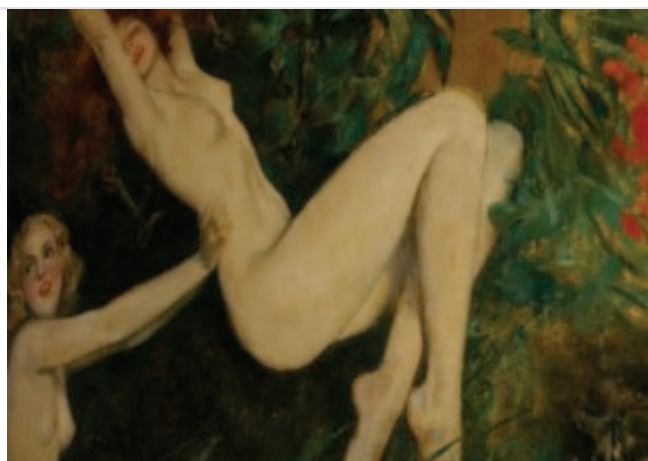
KEN OKISHI IS AN ARTIST WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK AND BERLIN. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



restaurants

In Artforum, Artist Ken Okiishi Becomes a Restaurant Critic

By Andrew Russeth 10/25/11 9:56am



A detail of the Leopard's Howard Chandler Christy murals.

As we continue to mourn the end of Sam Sifton's tenure as *New York Times* dining critic over here at the *Gallerist* office, we were pleased to see that *Artforum* has entered the restaurant reviewing game, with artist Ken Okiishi penning a superb article in the November issue of the magazine on the Upper West Side's Leopard at Des Artistes, the new Italian restaurant housed in the former home of Café des Artistes, which ran from 1917 through 2009.

Mr. Sifton, **you may recall**, spotted a bevy of art world elites during **his visits to the**

Leopard: Museum of Modern Art director Glenn Lowry and Whitney director Adam Weinberg were dining together, not far from former New Jersey governor Jon Corzine. Metropolitan Museum of Art vice president Harold Holzer was in attendance, as well as Sotheby's auctioneer Jamie Niven. He awarded it a solid two stars.

Mr. Okiishi finds less to like in the restaurant, though he does praise its iconic Howard Chandler Christy murals as "[c]risp, clean, flawlessly buffed kitsch." In slamming the restaurant, the artist breaks not only with Mr. Sifton, but also *The New Yorker's* Lizzie Widdicombe, who, by thrilling coincidence, also **happened to review the restaurant this week.**

"It's worth a trip just to sit at one of the candle-lit tables, sipping a goblet of Tintore and watching the tastefully blinged-out clientele file past," Ms. Widdicombe writes. "It's the kind of convivial, unpretentious place that, in the end, is practically un-hatable."

Apparently she has not met Mr. Okiishi.

"The overwhelming design nonidentity of the new interior surrounding the murals stages a disjunction in eras that wobbles between novelty and lifelessness," Mr. Okiishi declares, and he reports that his dining companion told him, "You could also say the place looks a bit like a pizza parlor trying to be fancy." Mr. Sifton, on the other hand, was a fan, and declared the Leopard "an airy and cheerful

southern Italian clubhouse.”

The food also provokes disagreements. While Mr. Okiishi’s partner’s grilled chicken is “acceptable though unremarkable,” his porchetta “is shockingly dry” and its gravy “almost instantly develops a gloppy, gelatinous crust.” The restaurant, he says, is in “competition with the late grandes dames of spooky cuisine.”

Mr. Sifton had championed the offerings as “a testament to the rustic joys of Sardinia and Sicily: simple food, apparently simply prepared.” Ms. Widdicombe falls somewhere in between the two gentlemen, arguing that, unlike many restaurants of the Leopard’s ilk, “the food ... is far from an afterthought.” She orders carefully and finds a lot to like: pasta alla Norma, trofie and dorado, among them.

Mr. Okiishi’s review is not yet online, but it is worth a read for the rich history he offers of the restaurant, which involves Marcel Duchamp; his panegyric to the city’s aging restaurants, which feature “freaky food and forgotten décor”; and for his rightful slamming of “the endless feedback loops of social media” that guide our dining habits these days.

At the risk of sounding too boosterish (that has not stopped us before), we would like to lobby for a restaurant review column in *Artforum*, and nominate Mr. Okiishi for the role, since he is clearly a natural. For more of Mr. Okiishi’s restaurant criticism, pick up the Dec. 2010 *Artforum*, in which he highlighted the closing of Upper East Side haunt Gino as one of the best events of the year. “Tradition chokes reality, and now we can move on,” he wrote at the time. “Thank God.”

If you would prefer to see some of Mr. Okiishi’s art, you can watch his very beautiful film (*Goodbye to Manhattan* (2010), which screened at Alex Zachary in 2010, over on Ubuweb.

*topics: **restaurants, ken okiishi, lizzie widdicombe, new yorker, sam sifton, art***
