

Studio

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine / Summer 2008



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Chanelle Joseph / *Into The Unknown* / 2008

Profile

Harlem Renaissance Redux

01/ Susy Blu
Untitled from On the Block series
2008
Courtesy the artist

by Gayla Burks, Education Assistant

Without a doubt, Harlem is an internationally acclaimed nexus not only for black culture, but also for innovative creativity. Following in the vein of last century's Renaissance, Harlem continues to be a cultural capital. While there are many homegrown artists displaying their work in galleries or museums, or just along 125th Street, there is also a small pocket of international artists who contribute to the up-town artistic culture.

On the second floor of a turn-of-the-century brownstone, a panoramic picture of the block between 120th and 121st streets on Lenox Avenue is taped to blue walls. Here, Italian artist Susy Blu keeps a record of the neighbors she has and hasn't met. On her laptop, she has interior portraits of some of her neighbors' homes, from images of reading glasses to yellowed photos of family members, but none of the photos include the person living in the house today. "It is interesting and challenging to show one's personality without the face" says Blu. "Their spaces and traces and what they buy say a lot. You can tell what they value. You can look at the pictures on the fireplace and you can tell if there are children home." Her project, appropriately titled, "On the Block," focuses on the architectural and personal interiors of each building on her block, including apartments, restaurants, a newsstand and a school.



This project would be nearly impossible without the financial support and creative encouragement of the Harlem Studio Fellowship, where artists such as Blu are given creative license in the residency. Founded a few years ago by Ruggero Montrasio, a third-generation Italian gallery owner, the fellowship invites two or three international artists every three months. The current artists originate from Italy and Japan, and are given free range to express their creativity. At the end of the fellowship, a show curated by Raffaele Bedarida displays the works created during their stay.

For Blu, the fellowship is heaven-sent, and she has been allowed to stay longer to complete her project. "It takes time for [my neighbors] to build trust, which leads to intimacy. They have to get to know me before they allow me in their homes," she says. While documenting Harlem, she has grown roots. "Harlem makes you feel you are a part of something, that you are not just renting an apartment or a room." This sense of community makes her project even more sensitive. "Since everything is changing, in a few years," she says, "these pictures will be a very touching intimate journal so you can look back and say, 'Yeah, it used to be like that.'"