

Genre-Jumping at James Fuentes's New Gallery

Jeffrey Deitch's old employee's helping to create a Chinatown art scene

By **Ben Davis** Tuesday, Feb 5 2008



Fuentes near a large sculpture he's hopefully not trying to sell

Alana Cundy

It's been a good year for [James Fuentes](#). In January 2007, he opened his small gallery on St. James Place in Chinatown, a building sandwiched between a parochial school and a funeral home. A former gallery director for [Deitch Projects](#), Fuentes founded his namesake space with the check he received for co-conceiving *Artstar*, the art-world reality-TV show starring his former boss, [Jeffrey Deitch](#) (shown on the Gallery HD cable channel). Since then, Fuentes has been living in a small apartment above the space.

That's soon to change. The opening of the New Museum on the Bowery and the flourishing of a number of young, interesting galleries in the area, like [Miguel Abreu](#) and Orchard, have brought attention and visitors his way. His space stands now as one of the pillars of a modest, emerging "scene." He has just hired his first staff member, and in a few months he's moving out, with both floors of the location becoming exhibition space.

Most significantly, after one year of business, the 30-year-old dealer can boast that two of the artists he shows are in the upcoming [Whitney Biennial](#), which opens March 6. One is [Agathe Snow](#), a sculptor who cultivates a mythic gypsy-punk vibe, and who built a kind of post-apocalyptic lounge in his gallery last spring incorporating a replica of a whale skeleton. Visitors

could participate in a makeshift trading post, joining in the fantasy that civilization had been obliterated by a deluge.

The other Biennial artist is [Gang Gang Dance](#), a "neo-tribal" art-rock band that includes Lizzi Bougatsos and [Brian DeGraw](#), both of whom have shown independently at Fuentes's gallery (DeGraw, in fact, was the very first artist Fuentes showed). Fuentes seems to have an eye for the social, genre-jumping work that the Whitney's curators are highlighting this year, with the venerable art festival's expanded focus on performance at the Seventh Regiment Armory.

This affinity for street-smart, context-sensitive art is partly explained by Fuentes's own background. He moved to New York 10 years ago, a graduate of Bard. The Broome Street space he first rented, it turned out, was the former headquarters of famous dealer [Gavin Brown](#). Visitors stopping by to see Brown found Fuentes instead, showing off the work he liked, his gallery partly subsidized by his job as a Met security guard. That space lasted three years; its final exhibition was of [Williamsburg](#)-based painter [Cheyney Thompson](#), an artist who now shows with the [Andrew Kreps](#) Gallery—and who is also featured in the upcoming Biennial.

Fuentes then spent several years curating shows independently and learning the ropes. Most notably, he organized a 2003 show at the Proposition gallery titled "The United States of America vs. [Alfredo Martinez](#)," dedicated to works sent from prison by Martinez, a convicted forger of drawings by [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#). This was followed by his stint working at Deitch Projects. In person, Fuentes is low-key and unassuming—the opposite of the legendary Deitch hype machine. But he says he took a lot away from his job there: "I asked Jeffrey his secret. He said, 'It's simple: It's about relationships. That's how you build.' "

For a dealer, this means cultivating relationships with collectors, of course, but also cultivating artists. For each of the shows at the St. James Place space so far, Fuentes has spotlighted an artist he has worked with for at least five years, the exception being "Five Points," the current exhibition by Swiss artist [Georg Gatsas](#). Even Gatsas, however, has his place in the gallery's orbit, having collaborated with Bougatsos and DeGraw for some time, organizing projects with them in Europe.

"James understands my work very well," Gatsas says. Indeed, his project is partly inspired by the kind of site-responsive art the space has shown in the past. The gallery, which is narrow and deep, is divided by a plywood-clad wall, meant to evoke the shabby construction sites of the surrounding neighborhood. In the darkened space behind this barrier, two slide projectors run in

tandem, offering a six-minute loop of Gatsas's photos of Chinatown, capturing its cheap storefronts, litter, graffiti, and cluttered apartment interiors.

Interspersed throughout the slide-show are portraits of artists who live in the area, most within a five-block radius of the gallery, including Bougatsos, DeGraw, Snow, multimedia artist [Spencer Sweeney](#), painter [Rita Ackermann](#), and others. Speakers play a soundtrack of rhythmic clanks and drones: This is a performance by the band I.U.D., a side project of Bougatsos's, which Gatsas recorded live, then had experimental musician [Norbert Moslang](#) remix. As a whole, "Five Points" is a sort of testament to the spirit of creative collaboration that literally surrounds Fuentes right now.

It's a good place to be, though he keeps his role in historical perspective. "Every few years, the New York art scene shifts and picks a new neighborhood," he says, as Gatsas's images appear and disappear on the gallery wall. "Soho, the East Village in the '80s, Chelsea . . . The dream is to be a part of that kind of history, even in a little way."