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The New York Times **Style** Magazine

Artifacts | The Curse of 57th Street



An installation view of "When the Fairytale Never Ends," which features works by Gretchen Ryan, Henry Darger, Wim Delvoye and Robert Lazzarini.

CULTURE By LINDA YABLONSKY JANUARY 20, 2011

The opening this week of a new gallery in Midtown has generated unusual confusion in the worlds of art and fashion. Because the gallery's name is fordProject, it has been promoted as a division of Ford Models, and many of us who have seen fashion climb on the back of art — and

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vice versa – to broaden its audience naturally assumed that the gallery was an offshoot of the agency.



From left, director Tim Goossens, managing director Rachel Vancelette and Altpoint C.E.O. Guerman Aliev.

It isn't. And though both are subsidiaries of Altpoint Capital, a private equity company based in Manhattan, and the gallery resides in the same building that houses the modeling agency's women's division, the gallery is not a front. According to Guerman Aliev, Altpoint's C.E.O. and the wizard behind the corporate curtain, fordProject is just a way for his fashion acquisition to mint more money. "There is something called brand extension," Aliev said in a phone interview, "when you have a brand that is strong and you sell finite goods through it, but everyone recognizes the brand. My intention is to establish the gallery as a bona fide artistic outlet, to the extent that fashion could be leveraged with it,

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but fashion has nothing to do with it. We will not show portraits of fashion models, for example, or display the work of fashion photographers. It is a contemporary art gallery alone.”

But why align the two brands in the public mind if their operations are actually unrelated?

“As our shows go on,” he replied, “I think the confusion will go away. But the initial confusion is not a bad thing, at least from a cynical marketing point of view. People knew about the gallery long before it opened.”

In fact, the gallery has some genuine art cred. Its director, Tim Goossens, has spent the last several years as a curator for P.S. 1/MoMA. The managing director, Rachel Vancelette, came to her job after stints with the Barbara Gladstone and Yvon Lambert galleries. But fordProject will not represent individual artists. Instead, Goossens will select independent curators to organize exhibitions of works either consigned to or commissioned by the gallery, and Vancelette will sell them.



“Notre Époque a la Poésie Qu'elle Mérite,” 2010, by Vincent Olinet.

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The Brussels-based curator Lara Pan put together the inaugural show, “When the Fairytale Never Ends,” which she describes as “an artificial paradise,” one with a very dark side. It includes devilish work by established names like Henry Darger, Elinor Antin, Kenny Scharf and Wim Delvoye (who contributed a painting on the stretched skin of a pig), but most of it is by younger artists who are getting their first exposure in New York. “Involuntary,” a show curated by Neville Wakefield (who does have ties to fashion), will follow in March.

But the most fascinating aspect of the gallery, which sits in a duplex penthouse atop a Warren and Wetmore building on West 57th Street, are its ghosts. They have nothing to do with either art or fashion but are said to have haunted the apartment, designed by Rafael de Cardenas, after becoming homicidal maniacs while living there.

Edna Crawford Champion, wife of the spark plug inventor, bought the building for her young French lover, Charles Brazelle, after he beat her husband to death in a Paris hotel. She told the police that Champion died of a heart attack, and they believed her. One night in New York they had a terrible fight and after he dealt her a mortal blow with a telephone, her bodyguards threw him out the window.

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“Peep Show,” 2010, by Panni Malek

The apartment was later acquired by the very social Carlton Alsops, whose storybook marriage began unraveling when they began hearing high heels clicking across the floor and the sounds of arguments late at night. Their Great Danes had nervous breakdowns. Mrs. Alsop walked out, never to be seen again. Mr. Alsop committed himself to a loony bin. On his release, he abandoned the apartment forever.

Can fordProject break the curse? Well, the space could engender hand-wringing, if not hysteria. It doesn't feel much like a gallery. Housing for the plumbing that feeds the many dentist's offices in the building make for awkward viewing angles, obstructing some works and shortening sight lines to others. The upstairs video projection rooms are simply claustrophobic. Still, Pan's show, which borrows from the occult, is pretty smart. And it breaks out new talents like Gretchen Ryan, whose painting

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of 5-year-old beauty pageant contestants had already grabbed a collector, Courtney Love, who lent it. The artist Brock Enright calls himself “a kidnapper of collectors.” And Panni Malek’s painting envisions a brothel where grim fairy tales become tools of seduction.

Pan says, “It’s all connected to fantasies.” And, frankly, to fashion too.

“When the Fairytale Never Ends” continues through February 18 at fordProject, on the 19th and 20th floors of 57 West 57th Street.