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Village Person

St. Louis art collector Gregg Smith shares his passion, the work of 1980s New York artists, in a new exhibition

By Ivy Schroeder

There are those who, at the very mention of East Village art of the 1980s, shudder, groan or wrinkle the nose. After all, the art media has consistently maligned the works that came out of the '80s scene in the East Village in New York. Certainly a few stars from the scene have undergone an apotheosis, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring. But what happened to other artists of the East Village, such as Stephen Lack, "Fab 5" Freddie Brathwaite, Tim Rollins & KOS or Lee Quinones? Most have been either forgotten or assigned to the ashcan of art history, considered at most an interesting footnote to late-20th-century American artistic production.

But one St. Louis collector takes these artists very seriously indeed. Gregg Smith has amassed a collection of East Village art of the '80s that represents more than 70 artists and contains more than 300 artworks. And he's making the collection available to the public in a series of exhibitions on view in his office suite in the Central West End. *Like As Not* is the name of the inaugural exhibition of Alphaville, Smith's ad hoc gallery at 408 Euclid Ave.

Smith isn't interested in getting rich from his collection -- he's not selling. Nor is he interested in his own reputation as a collector -- he knows more than anyone else what most people think about art of the '80s. He is interested becoming a resource for people who want to know about '80s art from the East Village. He invites students, scholars and the just-plain-curious to visit the collection, view his videotapes and listen to the thumping vintage sounds of proto-rap artists Curtis Blow and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five.

The current show inhabits two rooms of Smith's office suite, and it's impressive. The first room includes an enormous canvas by Rick Prol, a neoexpressionism-meets-graffiti number that pays homage to Goya; a stunning silver canvas construction by Steven Parrino that references Warhol, minimalism and Rauschenberg's combine paintings; a painting by Barry Bridgwood that represents a very early use of computer imaging; and a wonderful photo work by Lynne Augeri titled "Upside Down Blonde" from 1985. The second room features works by Jimmy DeSana, Judy Glantzman, Keiko Bonk and Richard Hambleton, among many others.

Never heard of 'em? You may be the victim of the efforts of the New York gallery cartel, which, according to Smith, systematically quashed the rich creative work coming out of the East Village because it didn't fit into their economic or artistic program. Looking at the work, you have to believe Smith is right. This work is rich, smart and better than 90 percent of the art that actually "made it" in the '80s.

See *Like As Not*, on view now at Alphaville. If you miss it, Smith is opening *East Village Abstraction* in mid-January. Smith, the most generous and enthusiastic of collectors, genuinely wants you to see it. Watch out: He knows what he's talking about, and he'll make an '80s convert of you.