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Mystery in Manhattan: why New York galleries are turning to intrigue this spring

Several dealers are taking a “less is more” attitude by, for example, giving little away in press releases—and it’s making a notable difference

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Louder than words: a flyer for Stanley Brouwn's exhibition at Portal 5 gives nothing away
Courtesy of Yoshi Hill

Attention has become the ultimate commodity this century, and the art business has drilled this lesson deeper and deeper into its operating principles every year. But as artists, commercial galleries, institutions, cultural brands and publications race to outcompete each other daily for a precious slice of your headspace, saying less is becoming a magnetic force in New York's art scene again.

For proof, stop by Laura Owens's self-titled solo exhibition (until 19 April), held across Matthew Marks gallery's two spaces on West 22nd Street. I say "stop by" because reading the press release reveals almost nothing about what, exactly, the celebrated artist is up to in her first solo show in this city since 2017. The most explanatory detail the statement provides is that the show consists of "an immersive environment of new work in painting, sculpture and handmade books" that also "includes kinetic elements, moving pieces within the artworks that continually point to their spatial and temporal

contexts”. Beyond that, you’re on your own.

Play and discovery

Although the strategy might sound obnoxious on paper, having visited the show I would say that going in with almost no foreknowledge amplifies the sense of play and discovery central to its premise. There are multiple secret doors and a video piece that I needed a hint from the gallery staff to locate. Three different rooms work like visual riddles, challenging viewers to separate printed patterns, objects and flourishes from handpainted and three-dimensional ones. The front desk of the larger gallery appears on the exhibition’s checklist for a good reason—don’t just breeze by it without looking closely—and flipping through the artist’s ingenious handmade books unfurls (sometimes literally) all kinds of delightful, occasionally mischievous surprises.

An exhibition shrouded in even more mystery opened in Tribeca on the same day as Owens’s. Titled *Stanley Brouwn: in a certain direction*, it was guest-curated by Yoshi Hill—a dealer of rare artist books—for the project space Portal 5. Brouwn, a Suriname-born, Fluxus-linked conceptual artist who died in 2017, took a quasi-monastic stance against marketing himself and his art for much of his career: he said no to interviews, photographs of his work and explanatory texts inside or outside his exhibitions. Hill honoured the late artist’s wishes as a way to “provide for an unmediated relationship between the work and the viewer that is increasingly challenging to preserve in a world defined by the attention economy”, he says.

“For my part, except for announcing the daily open hours, promotion was minimal, and by the second week of the exhibition, word-of-mouth attracted a surprising mix of artists, curators, journalists, art historians, gallery-hoppers and collectors,” Hill says. Many, he adds, expressed relief at not needing to take out their phones.

Effective intrigue can emerge organically, too. Alex Meurice, the owner of the Lower East Side gallery Foreign & Domestic, learned as much via the group show *God alone loves all things and he loves only himself* (until 6 April). The show

came together in just six weeks after a scheduling issue elsewhere in the programme. Meurice says that the press statement—which consists entirely of six sentences on the divine from the late French philosopher Simone Weil—was “partly a function of the compressed time in which it was conceived and partly a reaction against the dreary obligation of explication or exegesis”. Accompanying the text is an image of a provocative sculpture by the artist Jonah Dillon, comprising a weathered crucifix affixed to the grille of a working industrial fan.



Jonah Dillon, *Untitled (fan & crucifix)* (2024), featured in the group show *God alone loves all things and he loves only himself* at Foreign & Domestic
Photo: JSP Art Photography

The show's enigmatic atmosphere extends to one of its featured artists, the pseudonymous, South Carolina-based TINMANTIS. TINMANTIS's works, often referencing the dark technocracy we're entering, have attracted support from the pioneering, punk-inspired artist Mark Flood and another "well-known New York artist who collects his work", Meurice says. The dealer adds that he has only interacted with TINMANTIS through text (mostly direct messages on Instagram) but imagines the artist would be happy to leave their relative isolation "when longed-for success comes". Until then, however, silence and shadows have their advantages.

"I think today information serves more to obscure the world than to reveal it," Meurice says. "We dream of a space that asks nothing of us, where you don't have to explain yourself or have something explained to you, where you can stay one minute or one hour, alone or in a group, and pay nothing. I think that is the power and beauty of a great gallery."

- [Laura Owens](#), *Matthew Marks Gallery, 522/526 West 22nd Street, New York, until 19 April*
- [God alone loves all things and he loves only himself](#), *Foreign & Domestic Gallery, 24 Rutgers Street, New York, until 6 April*

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