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Lower East Side Tale, Refracted Nine Times

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Heaven knows the tired old New York art world could use a fresh story or two. This summer it gets one, secondhand, in "Lush Life," a big and unusually ingenious group show spread over nine galleries, all but one on the Lower East Side.

Assembled by two independent curators, Omar Lopez-Chahoud and Franklin Evans, the show was inspired by the Richard Price novel "Lush Life," the 2008 best seller that doubled as a Raymond Chandleresque police drama and a picaresque homage to the Lower East Side, a neighborhood that was long an immigrant enclave and is now, increasingly, a yuppie playground.

Mr. Price's story takes place almost entirely within its bounds, which extend from, roughly, Houston Street south to Canal, and from the Bowery to the East River. The nine gallery shows — at Sue Scott Gallery, Y Gallery, Collette Blanchard Gallery, Lehmann Maupin, Salon 94 Freemans, Invisible-Exports, Scaramouche, Eleven Rivington and On Stellar Rays — correspond to the nine chapters of the novel, and work in each refers, sometimes specifically, to the book's plot.

On an early fall night in 2002, with the emergency mood induced by 9/11 still in the air, a young white man, a waiter in a local upscale bar-restaurant, is shot and killed on Eldridge Street in a mugging attempted by an even younger black man from nearby public housing. The killer runs off, and the rest of the book is basically about the hunt for him by a hard-boiled but ruminative police detective from the neighborhood precinct.

Needless to say, other street-soiled characters enter the picture, as do images of bars, drugs, bereaved families and interrogation rooms. Along with repeated displays of racial conflict and police politics, there's a quasi-mystical apparition, a soupçon of sex and the constant presence — as an active personality more than as a passive backdrop — of the neighborhood itself and its stratified histories.

The show at Sue Scott, "Chapter 1: Whistle," serves, superbly, as a scene setter. It opens with a short film by the Danish artist Nanna Debois Buhl about the Lower East Side, with Jacob Riis's century-old photographs of subhuman poverty accompanied by the bland words of a contemporary tour guide.

And seen in the context of the novel, other works take on specific narrative dimensions.

A 2005 abstract painting by Joanne Greenbaum, with its linear webs, can be imagined as a bird's-eye map of the area, with Alice O'Malley's blurry, beautiful shots of bars and shops bringing us down to ground level. David Kramer has

equipped the gallery with a functioning bar, and a piece by Derrick Adams — stacked photographs of a black male head ornamented with silver brickwork patterning — can be taken as a reference to the low-income housing that surrounds relentlessly gentrifying terrain.

A rumored appearance of the Virgin Mary in a Rivington Street deli — in reality nothing more than an accident of condensation on a freezer door — makes for one of the novel's more sardonic early episodes. And it is neatly suggested here by Judi Werthein's video of her own projected "live" figure of the Virgin created in Spain in 2006.

The show wraps up with an installation by David Shapiro of drawings, small sculptures and found objects spread out on a tarp like a sidewalk display, and with a wall sculpture by Justen Ladda: a narrow lozenge of polished cedar called "Blue-Red Night Mirror," which can, with a little imagining, be taken as a blood-tinged reflection of the noirish "Lush Life" world.

If none of the other shows now open — the one at Eleven Rivington makes its debut on Thursday — offer as many point-for-point correspondences with the novel as this one does, there are still plenty of direct allusions to it.

For example, the dialogue-intensive book's long second chapter is taken up primarily by the marathon police grilling of a co-worker of the victim who is initially suspected of the shooting. The chapter's real subject, though, is a broader one: the slipperiness of truth. Although it is pretty clear that the man is innocent, the intersection of his own self-centered fears and the need of the police to nail a perpetrator keeps the illusion of his guilt in play.

The corresponding exhibition, "Chapter 2: Liar," at On Stellar Rays, alludes to the mistaken interrogation in an amusing video of polygraph performance by Carol Irving and in a bulky Ezra Johnson painting that consists of the words "Large Doubt." But the pieces by other artists — Tim Davis, Scott Hug, Elisabeth Subrin — touch on more generic truth-suspending elements, like addiction, money and celebrity, that not only swim through the book but are shaping the new Lower East Side.

At barely five pages, the novel's third chapter, "First Bird (A Few Butterflies)," is one of the shortest. In it the young killer, Tristan, sneaks back to his family's apartment after the murder and lies in bed listening to the cries of birds at dawn, a sound at once comforting and disturbing.

And the show at Invisible-Exports expands rather than merely illustrates the novel by pushing the bird imagery hard: in Nicholas di Genova's ballpoint-pen drawing of freakish winged creatures; in Karen Heagle's fantastic painting of vultures picking over fruit; and in Dana Levy's ghostly video of live doves flocking and fluttering in a museum gallery filled with stuffed bird specimens.

It's easy to read in Ms. Levy's video a visual metaphor of physical death and the migration of souls, which together form a theme of the book's fourth chapter and of the exhibition "Let It Die" at Lehmann Maupin. Robert Beck has assembled the

equivalent of a memorial street shrine outside the door. Ink drawings of skeletal figures by Nina Lola Bachhuber and a tiny painting of a bedroom immolation by Amy Longenecker-Brown command the space inside.

The single most interesting work here, though, is Tommy Hartung's brilliantly edited video "The Story of Edward Holmes," which starts out as an adventure story of a white man exploring exotic lands and goes on to flaunt and scramble racial stereotypes and make value-freighted categories like savagery and civilization seem indistinguishable.

Race and racism loom large in Mr. Price's book, and his handling of them is problematic, not as purposefully incendiary as [Tom Wolfe's](#) take in "Bonfire of the Vanities" but still cartoonishly reductive. And here again, the show complicates and improves on the book.

In "Chapter 5: Want Cards, " at Y Gallery (a minute basement space on a 1980s East Village model) Rudy Shepherd's bust-length paintings of black men refer to mug shots of a kind found on so-called want cards but are still personable portraits. In a crazy-quilt installation at Collette Blanchard of photographs by Robin Graubard, almost all taken on the Lower East Side, drugs and alcohol are social levelers: everyone, black and white, looks equally wasted.

In Chapter 7 of the novel Tristan is finally identified and arrested, and his gun, the murder weapon, feverishly sought throughout the book, is recovered. It is also there in the matching show at Salon 94 Freemans in the form of a stretched-out sculpture by Robert Lazzarini. But the saga isn't over. The killer is a juvenile, a status that precludes a life sentence and reduces his potential prison time to a term calculated in the title of the book's penultimate chapter: "17 Plus 25 Is 32."

This is also the title of the Chapter 8 show at Scaramouche, where art imaginatively speculates on the past and future of this character, as the book does not. With its spectacularly savory New York dialogue, the novel is stylistically addictive but purely as a narrative it has distinct limitations. Page by page it has the buzz of a ready-to-go film script. But it also has a pat Hollywood ending, with anodyne doses of redemption spread all around, short-circuiting whatever moral complexity the story might have had.

Art is, or can be, expert at creating complex stories, particularly moral dramas, of a kind that push beyond being mere eye candy for the investing classes. This is not to say that "Lush Life," the exhibition, can't be enjoyed or understood without a knowledge of "Lush Life," the book. The show may lose a level of impact if certain narrative cues are missed, but it will still get you walking the streets of a neighborhood that is, with continuing transformation, both a threat and a promise, a morality tale in itself.