

FASHION & STYLE

Lia Gangitano, a Transgressive Gallerist and Art World Darling

By DAVID COLMAN JUNE 1, 2016

Art galleries adhere to a familiar architectural playbook. An aloof gallery employee sits up front. Soaring white walls inside. Somewhere in the back, unseen, the gallery's owner.

But Lia Gangitano, 48, the founder of Participant Inc, the alternative art space on the Lower East Side on East Houston Street, does not hew to this formula. Her floors are rough plywood. Her walls — like her hair, sexy-nerdy eyeglass frames and sense of humor — are all fairly black. And Ms. Gangitano can usually be found on a couch or at a table, sheltered from the public by only a small partition.

For 15 years, Ms. Gangitano has brought witty, raucous and challenging works to the art world's attention on a modest budget. But she has also managed to achieve something even more rare: a vibrant gallery scene that seems to reject the antiseptically academic atmosphere pervading much of the avant-garde art world.

That hard work is finally paying off, at least in acclaim. In February, she was the first recipient of an award bestowed by White Columns and Shoot the Lobster gallery for “creating a context and community for art to thrive.” Last year, Maine's Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture gave her its prestigious Governor's Award for Outstanding Service to Artists.

If anything tipped recent attention her way, it was the mini-retrospective she organized over a year ago on Greer Lankton, the pioneering 1980s transgender artist

who fashioned her own personal universe, making a coterie of hand-sewn, mannequin-size dolls. The show attracted thousands of visitors and landed on more than a dozen best show lists for 2014 — and even a few more in 2015.

Ms. Gangitano has always supported artists who challenge race and gender roles, among them Justin Vivian Bond, Vaginal Davis, Kathe Burkhart, Kembra Pfahler, Genesis P-Orridge and M Lamar, the twin brother of the actress Laverne Cox.

“There are already artists’ awards,” said Matthew Higgs, the director and chief curator of White Columns. “What was missing was an award to these kinds of maverick individuals who have dedicated themselves to establishing a hospitable world for art to exist in. Lia is the perfect manifestation of that.”

It’s no simple task, without the influx of money that fuels commercial galleries. Participant Inc survives on donations and grants. Its annual budget is a mere \$250,000, Ms. Gangitano said, and that pays for everything, including exhibitions, rent and salaries. (Participant Inc hopes its annual fund-raising event — a “secret garden party” in the East Village on Wednesday — will raise about \$25,000.)

“It’s very much a labor of love — and a vow of poverty,” she said in her trademark deadpan. “I have a lot of teaching jobs.” (She wasn’t exaggerating. Ms. Gangitano has taught at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, fine arts programs at New York University, the School of Visual Arts in Gramercy Park and Hunter College.)

But while Ms. Gangitano’s financial tightrope act is impressive, her greater prowess is in fostering an arts community fiercely independent of the commercial gallery circuit. It’s not by accident that, unlike most galleries, the walls of Participant Inc are usually painted black. Ms. Gangitano can often be found working or chatting with a friend or colleague on a long sofa covered with a flokati. Openings at Participant Inc are young, packed and colorful, and feel more like parties in a Bushwick loft.

Approachable, warm and unpretentious, Ms. Gangitano creates a kind of a human framework for taking in the art she shows, which can be obscure, confrontational or challenging, as are some of the artists themselves.

“I am VERY difficult,” the artist and performer Vaginal Davis wrote in an email. “Either someone is interested in me and my work or they aren’t. I have a disdain for the wealthy and privileged. I offend easily, and am ready to throw down at the slightest provocation.”

By contrast, she said, Ms. Gangitano, “holds gravitas with that thoughtful presence of hers, and she is so sophisticated, never shrill, very calm and serene.”

David Joselit, the art critic and art history professor for City University of New York, also credited Ms. Gangitano with nurturing artists who have been marginalized. “She’s been able to create a set of practices that haven’t really found a secure home elsewhere,” Mr. Joselit said. “That’s a huge accomplishment in a city like New York, and one that’s getting rarer and rarer.”

As the gallery name suggests, Ms. Gangitano plays an active, collaborative role in Participant Inc shows. She has published books, staged performances, hosted film shoots, mounted plays, offered writing workshops and created artist residencies.

Last winter, she paired painted screens by the artist Martin Gustafson with choreographed performances by Stanley Love. This spring, she worked with Justin Vivian Bond to curate a series of performances for the Public Theater celebration of the singer’s 25 years in cabaret. Next summer, she is curating an ambitious show at Bard about Pat Hearn and Colin de Land, the art dealer couple, both of whom died in the early 2000s and were known for the unique, bohemian modern world they helped create.

Her hands-on approach has not been a conscious strategy. “No, no, no,” she said. “I just don’t know how to do it any other way. The social character of artmaking, the familial quality of collaborating, the communal aspects of activism, those are just my frame of reference. There was never a premeditated plan.”

Her seemingly tireless efforts strike some as selfless and even saintly. But a word to the wise: Don’t call her the Mother Teresa of the art world, as some have done.

“I have heard that one,” Ms. Gangitano said, looking pained. “I’ll be honest. I don’t even know what it means. Aren’t there other role models?”

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