U.S.

As Wealth Changes the Tenderloin, a Move to Preserve Artistic 'Gems'

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN JAN. 8, 2015

SAN FRANCISCO — Ira Watkins paints his pictures in a faded Dodge van with velveteen seats parked beside a center for seniors in the Tenderloin, a seamy part of town frequently associated with displaced loners, drug addicts in squalid alleyways and other manifestations of human misery.

Mr. Watkins, a courtly 73-year-old Texan, has spent three years living and working in his van while awaiting permanent housing. He is an accomplished painter with a recent gallery show to his credit, but the trajectory of his life is pure Tenderloin: a past, now distant, in which precious years and untold dollars were lost to a crack habit. "I found something I liked to do better," he said, rapping on a fresh oil painting taped to a board.

Mr. Watkins is one of more than 200 artists identified as "hidden gems" of the Tenderloin by the Wildflowers Institute, a nonprofit organization that helps communities define their cultural assets. In this case, the goal is to take a small stand against gentrification, casting a positive light on the people most likely to be displaced by the wealthy. Lately, more than a dozen technology companies, including Twitter, have relocated alongside the impoverished neighborhood, some buoyed by city tax breaks. The prospective changes to the Tenderloin — a noirish haunt of Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade and arguably the central city's last working-class neighborhood — have given rise to a new nickname: the Twitterloin.

Once a thriving hub of the city's night life, from theaters with gilded prosceniums to French restaurants with private bedrooms, the Tenderloin was until recently the place the tech economy forgot. The dense 40-block neighborhood — bordered by City Hall, affluent Nob Hill and Union Square — has been down on its heels since the 1960s, when its 100 or so historic residential hotels, believed to be the largest concentration in the country, began housing those left behind by urban renewal.

But now the Tenderloin has again become an arts arrondissement of sorts, encompassing claustrophobic rooms in residential hotels and formerly derelict public spaces. One new performance site, the Tenderloin National Forest, was once a



Ira Watkins painting in his Dodge van parked beside a senior center in the Tenderloin. Mr. Watkins is one of more than 200 artists identified as “hidden gems” of the Tenderloin by the Wildflowers Institute, a nonprofit organization that helps communities define their cultural asset.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times



Jennifer Mei, left, and Hanmin Liu, center, of the Wildflowers Institute meeting with the artist Hugh Leeman, whose abstract paintings have been shown in Mexico City.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times



Nathan Windsor, a former English teacher who specializes in paintings of Buddha, in his residential hotel room. The Tenderloin's residential hotels house roughly 4,000 people, many of them single men.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times



Del Seymour, center with hat, and Pam Coates, second from right, lead a walking tour of the Tenderloin for employees of Zendesk, a tech firm that moved into the neighborhood.

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vacant lot strewn with trash and used syringes; in 2009, an arts group called the Luggage Store began transforming it into a lush botanical hideaway featuring mosaic walkways, murals and papyrus-fringed fountains.

"The Tenderloin is a microcosm of what is happening around the world — a neighborhood of high poverty surrounded by affluence," said Hanmin Liu, the president of the Wildflowers Institute. But, he added, "it is also a place of curious resilience."

The institute will award certificates and other recognitions to the artists it deems "hidden gems" for their role in improving the neighborhood. They include Nathan Windsor, a former English teacher who is bipolar and specializes in portraits of the Buddha, which fill his cramped hotel room. Another is Shannon R. Steneck, who shattered a leg and foot three years ago in a suicide attempt in which he jumped off a four-story apartment building; his canvases are composed of thousands of triangles.

Many so-called gems are "diamonds firmed up under pressure," Mr. Steneck said.

DuVaul Parker, 54, who lives in the West Hotel, worked as a costume designer for the rapper M.C. Hammer and lived the high life until he lost it all in a string of "bad choices," he said. He eventually got a job sewing building awnings until a fall left him paralyzed; he spent several months on the streets. "I went from white linen suits with gold buttons to standing in line to get a room," he said.

Outside his window lies a whirl of cheap goods, dingy liquor stores and panhandlers, but Mr. Parker is tranquil, his apartment a luminous casbah of exotic décor. "Beauty is in the mind," he said. "What's out there doesn't exist in here."

The Tenderloin's residential hotels house roughly 4,000 people, many of them single men. Because the rooms are designed for people living alone, there is "a great potential for isolation," said Michael McGinley, the case management supervisor at the Curry Senior Center, which has posted Mr. Watkins's works on its website.

A free art studio and gallery in the neighborhood run by Hospitality House, a social service organization, draws about 3,000 people a year, roughly half of them homeless. On a recent day, one woman wove a God's eye while a man finished making a musical instrument. Art fills a basic human longing, said Ivan Vera, the program manager. "People here are thinking about, 'Where am I going to sleep?' and 'Where am I going to eat?' " he said. "Creativity gets neglected by poverty. But there's a grass-roots need to be creative for the sense of sanity."

At the Seneca Hotel, people concerned about depression among residents created an art class for them. Sylvester Guard Jr., 34, is a resident mentor and "gem" who wound up at the Seneca after years of homelessness — a pattern that began at age 14 when his father in Oakland gave him $20, deposited him at the foot of the Bay Bridge and wished him luck. "The dot-com kids got dropped off at college," he said.



James Chappelone working on one of his paintings. He often ventures to wealthier neighborhoods to scavenge for paint and other supplies discarded from home renovations.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times



Neighborhood residents and staff members gather in the performance space of the Tenderloin National Forest, an area that was once a trash-filled alley.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times



DuVaul Parker, a clothes designer who lives in a residential hotel in the Tenderloin, was once the costume designer for M.C. Hammer and other celebrities but lost it all because of a string of “bad decisions.”

Jim Wilson/The New York Times



The neighborhood’s inexpensive rents have drawn artists like Hugh Leeman, center, whose abstract paintings have been shown in Mexico City and who has designed and donated T-shirts to help street people earn money. Mr. Leeman at a gallery opening featuring his work.

Jim Wilson/The New York Times

"I got dropped off in another ghetto."

Mr. Guard designs posters — including one of a slumlord with a mold-green face — for a community organizing group, the Central City S.R.O. Collaborative. He has also been an artist for the Tenderloin Safe Passage program, which painted "yellow brick road" patterns on 11 blocks of sidewalk to help the neighborhood's estimated 4,000 children safely navigate home from school.

The neighborhood's inexpensive rents have drawn artists like Hugh Leeman, whose abstract paintings have been shown in Mexico City and who has designed and donated T-shirts to help street people earn money. But skyrocketing real estate prices are creating new challenges for a neighborhood already buffeted by poverty and other issues. Although zoning ordinances and laws protecting residential hotels make it extremely difficult to convert them to more lucrative uses, there are glimmers of affluence in the 'Loin: What was one of the city's first gay bathhouses, long vacant, for instance, is now Bulldog Baths, a cage-free dog resort.

Nevertheless, amenities plentiful elsewhere are still wanting, especially appealing nighttime destinations, said Randy Shaw, the director of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic and Uptown Tenderloin. Uptown Tenderloin, a nonprofit group, plans to open a Tenderloin Museum in the spring, featuring historical exhibits, arts and cultural events and a cafe. Also supporting the local "gems" is the Community Arts Stabilization Trust, started in 2013 to secure space for arts organizations at risk of displacement.

To artists like James Chappelone, who ventures into wealthier neighborhoods to find paint discarded from renovations, the Golden Gate Bridge and other picturesque sites are far less inspiring than the characters in his midst. "The people down here have been on the road a little bit," he said. "You can't live anywhere in San Francisco that's as colorful as the Tenderloin."

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Advocates for the homeless checking on people camping near St. Boniface Church. “The Tenderloin is a microcosm of what is happening around the world — a neighborhood of high poverty surrounded by affluence,” said Mr. Liu, of the Wildflowers Institute.

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