

The Washington Post

A Shifting Landscape For Conner Gallery

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Thursday, September 6, 2007; Page C05

Conner Contemporary Art is moving to Trinidad.

Leigh Conner has purchased a 12,000-square-foot former auto body shop at 1358-1360 Florida Ave. NE to house the eight-year-old gallery that bears her name. Her program for emerging artists, called "gogo art projects," will also occupy the building, which also has room for another business. The arts complex-to-be is in the burgeoning H Street NE corridor, also known as Trinidad.



A former auto body shop in Northeast Washington's Trinidad neighborhood is slated to become the new home of Conner Contemporary Art. (Conner Contemporary Art/gogo Art Projects)

"Let's face it -- the building's not sexy-looking right now," Conner says. "Every day I go over there I'm excited and nauseated by the process we're going through."

That process includes gutting the building, formerly Singletary's Auto Body Repairs, and rebuilding it to feature two galleries and an enclosed outdoor area for the exhibition of sculpture, video projections and installations.

Conner Contemporary will move to the new gallery early next year. Until then, Conner plans to participate in art fairs in London and Miami and to show artists' work by appointment.

Conner has been hoping to move from her 1,000-square-foot space for about three years. She considered neighborhoods all over the city but was drawn to the comparatively reasonable price of her new digs, as well as the "raw" neighborhood, she says.

Conner and business partner Jamie Smith purchased the building for \$1.4 million, according to city records.

"We wanted to secure a space large enough for our artists to be able to do what they want to do and not have to compromise their work," Conner says.

Conner Contemporary and *gogo art projects will have 6,500 square feet of space. Conner says she is "talking to several parties" about renting out the second floor, and she's open to having two galleries subdivide the space.

Donald Russell, executive director of Provisions Library, is considering the new Conner Contemporary building as a location for his resource center for activism and the arts. The city subsidized the center's rent for five years, and the lease on its Dupont Circle space is up Oct. 1. Provisions is one block away from Conner Contemporary, and Russell laments losing his neighbor.

"It's a blow," he says. "It's a loss, but absolutely I understand why [she's moving]. Dupont hasn't been the focus of the art gallery scene for a while."

The H Street NE corridor, once famous for race riots and crime, is now sprinkled with hipster bars -- such as Rock & Roll Hotel and Palace of Wonders -- that attract Saturday night crowds to rival other night-life hot spots like U Street NW. The area is also known as the Atlas District, after the Atlas Performing Arts Center at 1333 H St. NE.

Ayodamola Okunseinde has operated Dissident Display Studios and Gallery, at 416 H St. NE, since June 2006. His advice to Conner Contemporary or any new gallery in the area is to stay in touch with the neighborhood.

"It just seems that these establishments coming in are so different from the community," Okunseinde says. "We get a lot of neighborhood people sticking their head in saying, 'What's going on?' "

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Dissident Display hosts a free performance series as a way to connect with neighbors.

Mary Coble, who is represented by Conner Contemporary, owns a home and studio in the neighborhood. In a solo show in May, Coble subjected herself to electroshock therapy in a performance piece called "Aversion."

"They're making an investment in all of our futures," she says. "This gigantic complex opens up so many possibilities for the artist."