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News

Artists and Galleries Decry Sale of Iconic Chelsea Building

Hundreds of tenants could be displaced from the West 26th Street arts complex established by Gloria Naftali, now on the market for \$170M.



Aaron Short January 31, 2025



Installation view of *Motohiro Takeda: Something To Remember You By* at Alison Bradley Projects, one of several galleries housed at the West

Chelsea building (photo by Dario Lasagni, courtesy Alison Bradley Projects)

Contemporary art gallery owner and philanthropist Gloria Naftali spent much of her life turning a Chelsea warehouse at 508-534 West 26th Street into an affordable home for artists, photographers, and galleries and assured its tenants it would remain that way well after her death.

“I was the first person on the floor and took a space with no walls and I was told by her I don’t ever have anything to worry about,” sculptor and mixed-media artist Arlene Rush, who has been a tenant in the building for 30 years, said in an interview with *Hyperallergic*. “A lot of people were told that, since we’re long-term tenants here.”

The family’s estate had other ideas. Two years after Naftali died in 2022 at the age of 96, the trustees of the Raymond and Gloria Foundation quietly put the 400,000-square-foot commercial building up for sale for \$170 million and began soliciting bids for a new owner last December, as first reported by the [*Commercial Observer*](#).



A view of part of the 508-534 West 26th Street complex (photo Isa Farfan/*Hyperallergic*)

Derek Wolman, a real estate attorney with Davidoff Hutcher & Citron and co-executor of Naftali's estate, said the primary goal of the family foundation was to support the arts, Holocaust education, and causes that fought antisemitism.

“Unfortunately, the Raymond and Gloria Foundation cannot afford to maintain the building in its current form and also carry out its mission to support the numerous charitable purposes for which it was formed,” Wolman said in a statement to *Hyperallergic*. “We are hopeful we can find a buyer who will keep the character of the building intact as a community for artists where they can create and showcase their work.”

Tenants were aghast at the news. Artist Judi Harvest only realized they wanted to sell when she read the *Observer's* report. She immediately called an attorney for the estate and requested a meeting on January 14 with the trustees.

Some questioned whether a 180-day clause in their leases meant they could be cleared out of

their studios despite having four- to five-year leases.



Judi Harvest's "Venetian Satellite" (2006) in the lobby at 526 W 26th Street (photo courtesy the artist)

“The way it was handled was my biggest complaint,” Harvest said. “They’re biting the hand that feeds them. What would happen if we all moved out and they didn’t sell it right away. Is it better to have an empty building or a fully leased building?”

Others argue that Naftali wanted her 10-story art space to remain a hub for galleries and art studios in perpetuity, based on conversations they had with her and a line in her will that read: “It is my wish, but I pose no legal obligation, that the Foundation maintain the character and the use (primarily for artist studios and galleries) of the building located at 508-534 West 26th Street, New York, New York, as the same shall exist at the time of my death.”

Alison Bradley, whose namesake gallery has been in the building since 2021, echoed those sentiments. “Gloria always wanted this building as a safe haven for the arts and people like me can’t have a gallery without this building,” Bradley told *Hyperallergic*. “This is the antidote to the corporate contemporary art world and they’re going to annihilate it. And the art world is going to suffer if that happens.”

Built in 1910, the Chelsea warehouse was home to a book manufacturing company before Naftali converted it into inexpensive artist studios in 1993. She opened **Greene Naftali**, one of Chelsea’s first contemporary art galleries, two years later, and the building soon attracted hundreds of artists including Glenn Ligon, Gary Simmons, Louise Fishman, and

photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto. (Naftali's co-founder Carol Greene did not return a call requesting comment.)

It has remained a vital stop during Chelsea's Thursday night art crawls to nearby galleries including Thomas Erben, Morgan Lehman, Galerie Lelong, Alexander Gray Associates, and since-shuttered Mitchell-Innes & Nash.



The Galerie Lelong storefront at 528 W 26th (photo Isa Farfan/Hyperallergic)

For Mary Sabbatino, vice president and partner at Galerie Lelong, the gallery's move to Chelsea in the second week of September 2001 "is inextricably tied up with the trauma and loss of those days in New York."

"Later, as New York healed and rebuilt, we witnessed the growth of our artists as each of them embraced and challenged the space. The building has always been about artists and Gloria's vision for collaboration and community, which we have enjoyed being a part of for over 20 years," Sabbatino said in an email.

She recalled introducing painter Sean Scully to Naftali while they were negotiating the lease for the space.

“I’m certain her admiration of his work was a reason we did get the lease,” Sabbatino said. “We’ve lived a great part of the gallery’s story here and the gallery’s story will continue — here or elsewhere.”

Christine Berry, co-founder of Berry Cambell gallery, recalled how Naftali would “come to the building every day and say hi to everybody.”

“It’s a really wonderful community. One of the reasons we came to this building is because it was going to be an artist’s building and not any other business beyond the arts,” Berry told *Hyperallergic*.

Now the building’s future is uncertain. A representative from Colliers Capital Markets, which is marketing the building, said they have received interest from several potential bidders, but the sale could take approximately six months.

“The Foundation is focused on identifying a buyer that will continue to maintain it as a home for the art community,” said Zach Redding, managing director of Colliers Capital Markets.

Work by Motohiro Takeda at Alison Bradley Projects (photo by Dario Lasagni, courtesy Alison Bradley Projects)

Tenants are considering their legal options, which could include submitting a bid of their own, perhaps with another foundation or well-heeled patron of the arts.

Meanwhile, Chelsea Councilman Erik Bottcher and four other elected officials requested a meeting with the Naftali Foundation in the coming weeks to discuss finding a financial option that keeps tenants in their studios.

“I strongly believe that the tenants should remain in place and that this building should continue to serve as an affordable hub for the arts,” Bottcher said. “I am hopeful that through productive dialogue, we can work together to ensure that any future actions prioritize the best interests of the neighborhood and preserve its vibrant artistic community.”

For now, the building is bustling with Fashion Week shows and gallery openings while artists plan their schedules without any firm commitments that they will remain in their workspaces for the rest of the year.

“It’s a sad thing to keep pushing us out. We don’t need another luxury condo, we have plenty of them,” Harvest said. “Why do people want to live in Chelsea? Because it’s interesting. You take away the interesting part, and they’re just looking at each other.”

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