

Art in America

RECONSTRUCTIVE MEMORY: SAM SPILLMAN AT ULTERIOR

By *Louis Bury*  May 6, 2022 12:01pm



View of "In Case of Sam Spillman," 2022, at Ulterior.
COURTESY ULTERIOR

The renovation underway at **Ulterior**'s new, roomier gallery—on Broadway, half a block north of Canal—is also an artwork. In the middle of the space, artist **Sam Spillman** has built additional walls to create a freestanding 7-by-12-by-7½-foot room whose two interior chambers are identically sized. In addition to fabricating this structure, Spillman has been refurbishing the surrounding gallery in three phases, transforming the former apartment into a space more suited to exhibiting art. Now, numerous white walls and doorways partition off the main gallery, an office-space-cum-auxiliary-gallery, and a storage area. When completed, the main alterations, minus the central addition, will become permanent features.

The squat, rough-hewn structure, loosely resembling a mausoleum, makes for a mysterious focal point during the gallery's transition. Its two shadowy, half-open doorways—which visitors are not permitted to enter—reveal glimpses of identical bedrooms, each with the exact same items (nightstand, mirror, bed, sleeping bag, pair of men's dress shoes, floor lamp) in mirrored positions. Wood paneling and dark, hotel-style patterned carpeting make the quarters feel that much stranger, as though they were a set in a David Lynch film, or a shrunken version of the former living quarters. Piped in from the ceiling, a barely audible soundtrack, in which two voices whisper conspiratorially, adds to the beguiling atmosphere.

Though the rooms' contents are fictional composites drawn from Spillman's childhood memories of living in nearby Tribeca, they're far from homey. Instead, they evoke a sense of claustrophobia characteristic of the artist's other DIY architectural interventions, from an underground hallway built into a locker door (under, in-between, 2018) to an abandoned summer camp bunkhouse reassembled, with its roof inverted and floor incomplete, on the site of a manmade pond (Bad Mouth, 2021). This structure's cramped interiors contrast with the spaciousness of the surrounding gallery, which during phase one was empty save for a staticky flat-screen monitor situated, unexplained, face up on the floor.



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While the meaning of such details is elusive, visitors to the exhibition, titled "In Case of Sam Spillman," don't particularly need or want explanations, in part because the installation's evolving architectural elements are so materially compelling. The central structure's walls are layered with textured fabric and acrylic paint, resulting in skin-like, scabby textures. The spatial dynamics nod to the closet-like feel of Ulterior's previous home on Attorney Street, on the Lower East Side. Similarly, the two-birds-with-one-stone conceit of turning the new location's renovation into its inaugural exhibition testifies to the resourcefulness required of small and midsize galleries to survive in an industry dominated by wealthy apex predators.

For a gallery to ask an artist to execute this manual labor could potentially have been exploitative; and for an artist to agree to this conceit could have seemed merely performative. But both parties here approached the project with thoughtfulness and integrity, from the compensation agreement to the collaborative decisions regarding the renovation's details. Spillman studied architecture and worked in carpentry and construction before he switched

to art, spending more than five years as cofounder of BUILDlab LLC, a green building and design firm currently based in Dryden, New York. His art practice draws on that technical knowledge and takes inspiration from his early childhood memories of distinctive architecture, from the industrial streetscapes of 1980s SoHo and Tribeca to the dilapidated nooks and crannies of the former blacksmith shop in Brooklyn where his family subsequently moved.

Knowing Spillman's background helps make sense of the exhibition's title, which seems oddly focused on the artist for an installation so specific to the gallery. But Spillman's story and skill set makes the whole conceit possible. The contents of "In Case of Sam Spillman" might seem a commentary on the tradition of artistic interventions addressing the supposed neutrality of the white cube, from Marcel Duchamp's spidery twine to [Michael Asher's](#) drywall studs. Yet its context makes clear that the exhibition also addresses the art industry's role in the recent transformation of Tribeca into a gallery neighborhood, and similar transformations in other New York neighborhoods across generations. Spillman's work is a case study in how it looks and feels to be acted upon by history as, in your own small way, you act upon it in return.