

## Secondhand Row

BY JOSH PARISH | Inside Bedford's culture of bootlegs, used books and junk busts

At some point during the gentle morning hours, between the time when Saturday-night bar goers shuffle home to sleep and when the cafes open for Sunday brunch, Bedford Avenue between North 3rd and North 8th Streets makes a quiet transformation. Women and men, some dragging pushcarts, others driving station wagons, unfold card tables and spread brightly colored blankets onto the sidewalks. Handmade t-shirts and glass pipes are unpacked from cardboard boxes, weathered musical instruments, pirated DVDs and used books are arranged in neat rows. Basement flotsam, from out of print magazines to costume jewelry, is arranged smorgasbord style.

This is the street the neighborhood wakes up to—Secondhand Row, a bustling mall of artists and junk hustlers to rival the marketplace at old Algiers. “It’s kind of like a trade secret where most of it comes from,” says Terrence Miele, who has sold used books on the block for three and a half years, of the secondhand wares. Miele started collecting books when he was 13 years old. Now 33 (“the same age as Christ,” he smiles warily, sucking at the last half inch of a hand-rolled cigarette), he specializes in the higher end of used bookselling—first editions and

signed copies make up the bulk of what he brings to the street.

Vendors who have frequented the street long enough have a kind of unspoken claim over the same spot week after week. Miele’s is a prime one, at the southeast corner of 7th and Bedford, where L riders climb from the subway. “Sometimes a newcomer comes out and there’s a disagreement, but we show them the way it works pretty quickly. Anybody who’s been out here for a while has established a relationship with the businesses and the neighborhood. New York is New York and the streets are for the people, but when a vendor or artist puts their blood and sweat into a spot, they deserve it.”

Vending is Miele’s only full-time job; on a good Sunday he may work 12 hours and pull in \$200. (He shares an apartment and phone with friends in Williamsburg.) Other vendors have steady jobs away from Secondhand Row, but, like Miele, use the venue as an outlet to sell their crafts or to make pastimes pay off.

“This is my hobby to haunt the world,” says Steven Speranza, who sells bootlegged copies of horror and porn movies, his own paintings of horror monsters, and framed photos of partially nude

women. Speranza, 52, has a day job at an electronics shop in Greenpoint; he spends his nights poring over his collection of 12,000 movies, making copies or painting until 3 a.m., he says.

Like Miele, Speranza’s affinity of his product began when he was young, collecting horror memorabilia and drawing silver screen monsters as a teenager. The photos—some of them strange nudie combos of coyly smiling, bottomless women in bed with bags of potato chips—are of old girlfriends. When asked if the women know where their likenesses have ended up, Speranza changes the subject.

According to the letter of the law, many of the vendors on Secondhand Row aren’t really allowed to sell what they sell where they sell it. The Department of Consumer Affairs requires permits to sell merchandise like jewelry, toys, CDs and videos on the sidewalk. But a legislative cap on the number of licenses available—853 for all of New York City, with an exception for veterans discharged because of disability—means the demand greatly outweighs the supply.

Many vendors take advantage of a weighty legal loophole, though: the First Amendment. Stuff like paintings, books and photographs are protected by the right to free speech (though vendors are still subject to certain tax regulations). Eve Sibley, a 29-year-old artist who had her hand-printed T-shirt business on the Row shut down by police citing it as retail instead of art, found an opportune way to keep vending. She fashioned a wooden human cut-out wearing one of her shirts, took photos of buyers behind it, then sold them the \$10 photo—which came with a free T-shirt.

More often than not, cops don’t punish the infractions. Not that the risk of arrest or ticketing would be a powerful deterrent; Speranza says he’s spent 11 days in jail, and Miele has been threatened with confiscation of his merchandise several times.

“Sometimes you just have to say, come on,” Miele says. “There’s a guy up the street who’s sitting there selling a hundred vials of crack, and you’re hassling us for selling a signed Paul Bowles? These people aren’t outlaws, they’re out here trying to get by—these people live here, these people freeze here.”

