

# Then and Now

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## Billy Leroy

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words and photos  
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I first met Billy Leroy in 1998. A rough and ready kind of guy, he hung around the Hells Angels on the Lower East Side. Billy was a freewheeling, free-living man; serious, but easy going. Tough, yet a nice guy. Then I did not see Billy for a few years. He gave up his quest of becoming an Angel because he'd met a beautiful woman. Billy got married, had a lovely daughter, Celina, moved to Brooklyn and settled into the groove of developing a business.

A friend of mine, the obsessive, brilliant painter of the macabre, Joe Coleman, mentioned that, in 2004, Billy Leroy had taken over the antiques and props tent on Houston and the Bowery. The lot starts off as a sliver portion on the Bowery and houses a free standing, probably 45 feet long by 18 feet tall, cement wall. Keith Haring made this wall famous in the early '80s when he painted a three-eyed TV and a line of his dancing babies using Day-Glo orange paint. The stunning Haring mural faded and the whole lot became protected by a chain-link fence, separating it from the sidewalk.

It seemed like a crime to have this now famous wall, passed by hundreds of cars everyday, lying dead. The wall needed to be brought back to life with some new props. In the early '90s, on a mid-summer weekend, I, with the help of my partner Elsa, brought a long ladder to the site. We looked official enough as we climbed over the fence and painted a major mural on the freestanding cement wall. At the time, I was heavily into activism, fighting police brutality, gentrification and the homeless crisis—the wall had an activist edge.

By 2004, the other end of the lot, which was taking up half of the block, housed Billy's Antiques and Props tent. Entering into the tent is like escaping Manhattan and going on some exotic tour into an unknown land;

part carnival, part European side show. The interior is a mixture of Lower East Side art, antique bronze sculptures and Coney Island horror house, with a dash of assorted bric-a-brac from a sophisticated Upper East Side den of an aging dowager.

One particularly stunning piece that caught my eye was a stuffed tiger. I soon learned that Billy purchased the tiger from a man for \$1,500. Billy realized at the time he had something and partnered up with a college professor, who was interested in using science to determine the origin of the species. Soon after, naturalists connected to the American Museum of Natural History became involved and believe the specimen to be an extremely rare Japanese tiger. DNA results are pending.

As one continues their exploratory walk within this tent of marvels, they will see an eight foot high oak vitrine and a row of actual human skulls. Over to the left, next to the lit Burger King sign, is a 4 foot tall bronze sculpture of a fully armed American Marine Gulf War veteran, realistic in every detail. On my last visit, I was taken back by a disturbingly beautiful oil painting by Bullet Space artist Charles Schick. Taking a careful look at his artwork, you get the impression of having discovered a painter from the same school as Edward Munch; doomed, vaporous, post-death figures emerge from a dreamlike landscape, giving off the impression that they're embarking on some unearthly mission.

It is always worth visiting Billy's Props and Antiques. The place somehow works like a magical meeting ground and you are never sure who you will meet or see. This Bowery playground, one of the last remaining authentic downtown establishments, still looks and feels like the NYC we all love and remember. Ω

