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Critic's Notebook - An East Village Boutique Where the Avant-Garde Gathered
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It was back in 2017 that Svetlana Kitto, a Columbia University-trained oral historian who writes frequently about art, was researching a catalog for “Objects/Time/Offerings,” an installation at the Gordon Robichaux gallery by the artist Ken Tisa and found herself repeatedly encountering the name Sara Penn? Who was she?

Those with a long memory for fashion may recall Sara Penn as proprietor of a boutique called Knobkerry. A pioneering shop on Seventh Street in the East Village, it opened in the mid-1960s to sell clothes, jewels and artworks sourced globally and refashioned or interpreted by Ms. Penn in ways that contextualized them as beautiful objects and not ethnographic oddities.

Yet it was much more than a shop. It was a salon, a gallery, a gathering place for members of an avant-garde that thrived in 1970s New York, when the middle classes fleeing a dangerous city left behind a largely vacated Downtown that artists and bohemians eagerly rushed in fill.

And, far from being some struggling business in an obscure hole-in-the wall, Knobkerry was a success right from the start, rapidly taken up by the glossies, its offerings showcased in features promoting what, in less enlightened times, was ballyhooed as “Gypsy chic.” Never mind that the inventory at Knobkerry routinely included Indian cholis, silk kurtas, mirror embroideries from Pakistan, along with Moroccan jewelry, Indonesian batiks and Otomi embroideries from Mexico. “It wasn’t just a store that had a pile of stuff from all over the world,” Ms. Kitto said in interview to discuss “Sara Penn’s Knobkerry,” a just-published book resulting from her yearslong research and released to coincide with a related exhibition that opened at the Sculpture Center in Long Island City Oct. 14.

Knobkerry was, Ms. Kitto explained, a brick-and-mortar fixture of the Downtown arts scene, both a trading post and junction point for an ever-evolving cast of the artists, actors, dancers and musicians that created a milieu that sometimes seems in retrospect more legend than truth. Yet it was indeed a yeastier time, Ms, Kitto, 41, claimed.

Consider that Ornette Coleman shopped at Knobkerry. So did Jimi Hendrix, Louise Bourgeois and Lena Horne (and also, at various times in its existence, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mia Farrow, Janis Joplin and Yves Saint Laurent). That a store could function as a salon and gathering place for Black as well as white artists was remarkable even within the context of a Downtown sometimes more diverse in principle than practice, as Ms. Kitto’s book makes clear. Many then, as the artist David Hammons explained to Ms. Kitto, were “afraid to come in when they see all these Black people hanging out.”
A regular customer of Knobkerry and a devoted friend of Ms. Penn’s, Mr. Hammons once transformed the gallery with a show that was as much intervention as exhibit, mounted on the walls, floors, window and vitrines there in 1995. “My purpose was to get the attention to the store,” he told Ms. Kitto in a rare interview, referring to an installation that featured, among other curiosities, a deflated basketball turned into a rice bowl.

Yet Knobkerry had long since garnered abundant press attention, starting in the ’60s when Esquire, Vogue, The New York Times and The Chicago Tribune all featured the store in their pages. For its July 1968 issue, The Saturday Evening Post posed a young Lauren Hutton on its

cover, braless and clad in a skimpy mirror-embroidered vest, silver Indian armbands from Knobkerry and strands of hippie beads. The story's title was "The Big Costume Put On," and it purported to demonstrate for the magazine's seven million readers what "far-out" types on the coasts were wearing "instead of clothes."
In Ms. Penn's view the offerings at Knobkerry were never to be seen as "costumes" nor put-ons, but forays into understanding "world culture" decades before the term became a facile marketing tool. "People were so into the clothes," Ms. Kitto said.

And if some treated Knobkerry like a museum, that was an impression Ms. Penn was in no haste to dispel. "What she did, the way she conducted her business, has a lot of relevance for young artists," Kyle Dancewicz, the interim director of the Sculpture Center, said, referring to a multidisciplinary approach to their practice embraced by many young artists. "She chose a way to live in the world that relies on your own instincts and chooses over and over again to privilege integrity."

She sold goods, of course, but was less moved by commerce than creativity, Ms. Kitto said, and was little daunted by the obstacles put in her way as a Black woman in business. A letter of protest in the book, fired off by Ms. Penn to a shelter magazine editor that failed to credit Knobkerry's contributions in a photo, illustrates the personal cost of that position.
"If I sound paranoid it is only because I have been a pioneer in my field and watched others walk away with my ideas and gain acceptance and recognition," Ms. Penn wrote. Racism, she claimed, was the root cause.

"It mattered that everyone that worked for her had to know the history of what they were selling," Ms. Kitto said. Her wares were not merely "ethnic" trinkets. They were tribal Turkman necklaces from the 19th century or antique Japanese bamboo vases or silver filigree betelnut cases from India (transformed by Penn into minaudières).

From East Seventh Street, Knobkerry moved to St. Marks Place and later to SoHo and finally, at the turn of the millennium, to a shopfront on West Broadway in TriBeCa. Soon afterward, she shuttered the place, and the waters of memory seemingly closed over both it and her.
Before Ms. Kitto came along, her contributions seemed destined to be lost, if in plain sight. The dozen or so interviews Ms. Kitto conducted attempt to fill out a life that was eventful by any measure, one whose cast encompassed a Who's Who of the Black creative classes and whose dramatic turnings included a string of failed relationships and a disastrous marriage.

For a time, Ms. Penn even fled New York and lived with her mother in Pasadena, Calif. Inevitably, she returned to Manhattan where, old by then, she stored or dispersed her varied collections among friends and moved into a single room at the Markle, a women's residence run by the Salvation Army on West 13th Street.
Her lodgings, she told Ms. Kitto in the last interview before her death at 93, were no larger than three tables shoved together. Yet the rent included three meals a day, and so it was at the Markle residence that she spent the obscure last decade of her life.

"I was determined to find the woman," Ms. Kitto said, and through her a key to a Downtown scene unlikely to be reprised. "Who was Sara Penn?"
Ms. Penn was, as it happened, a woman as surprising as the goods she offered. Born in 1927 in rural Arkansas, she was raised in Pittsburgh and educated at Spelman College. Trained as a social worker, she was a natural polymath with an unerring eye and exceptional taste. She lived in Paris for a time, frequented the Cedar Bar in an era when that place was the Abstract Expressionists' canteen, easily navigating bohemian New York though rarely venturing north of 14th Street. (She considered herself one of the "Downtown girls," as a former associate of Ms.

Penn's told Ms. Kitto.)

Above all, she was a natural teacher.

"She had this brilliant ability to scope out beauty in objects and quality in people," the artist Mr. Tisa said last week at a Sculpture Center opening of works by Niloufar Emamifar and SoiL Thornton: tiny portable boxes and scrap object dresses created in the spirit of Knobkerry. "Sara helped me many times. She helped David Hammons."

She helped so many get their start or through the store that "it seems terrible so few people know who she is," said Ms. Kitto, whose book aims to change that perception.
A handful of her 15 oral histories are assembled in "Ursula," an arts journal edited by the writer Randy Kennedy and underwritten by the powerhouse gallery Hauser & Wirth. If there is a leitmotif linking Ms. Kitto's oral histories, it takes the form of tales illustrating either Mr. Penn's generosity of spirit or a stubborn diffidence that strikes with the force of a blow.

Aptly, then, at the entrance to the Sculpture Center show sits a beaded antique knobkerry, a club used in Eastern and Southern Africa for hunting game or else knocking one's enemies over the head.

"If Sara liked you, she was the most incredibly generous teacher and friend you could ever imagine," Mr. Tisa said. "If she didn't think you were so wonderful, she could dismiss you with a single look."