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Where the Wild Things Are

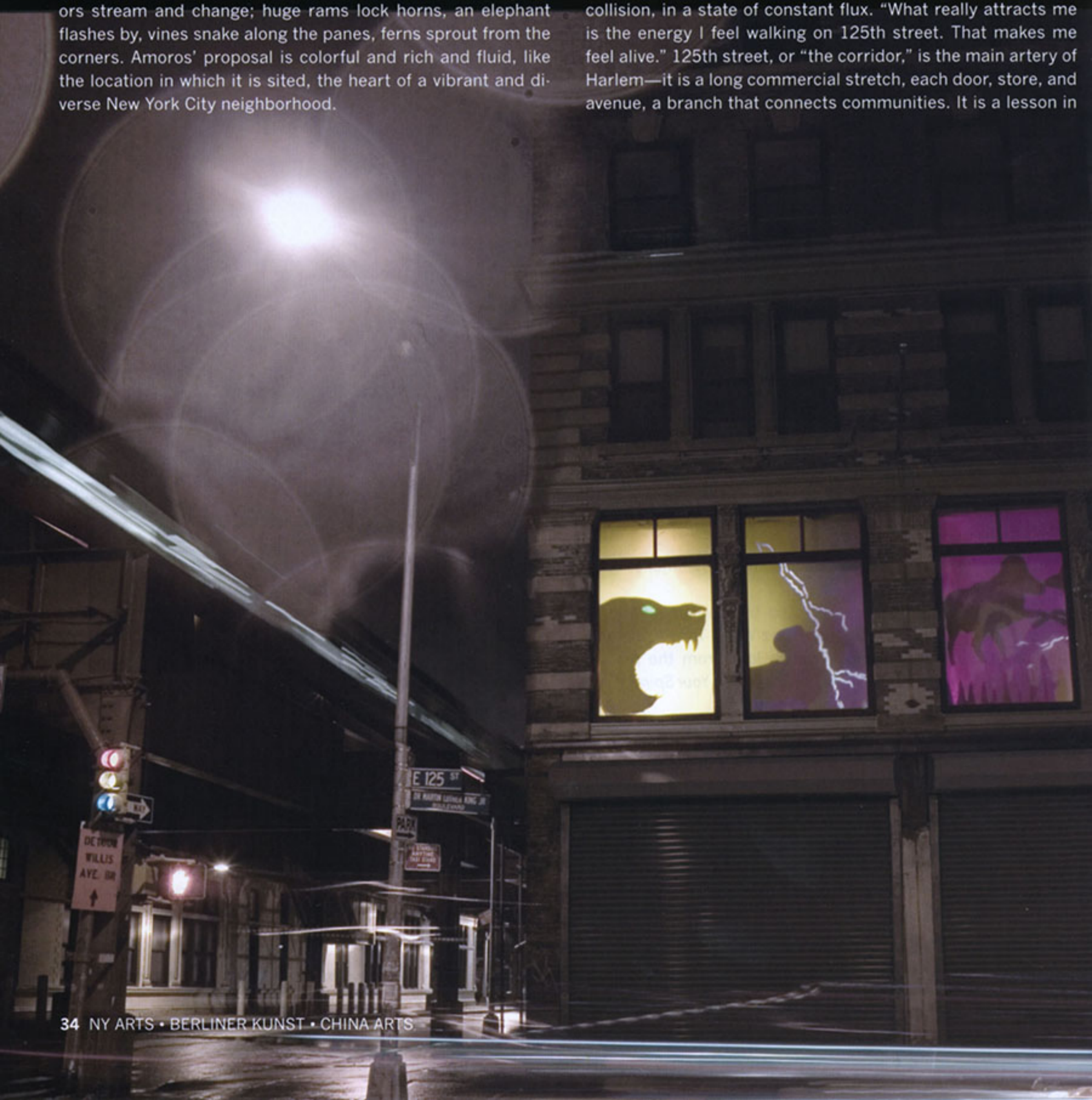
Tina Kesting travels to a new urban jungle

One hot summer Tuesday night I discovered wild animals dancing to disco lights at dusk, and it was not in my dreams. They pranced and grimaced over a Metro North platform on 125th Street and Park Avenue, Harlem.

Grimanesa Amoros has transformed an entire floor of the Lee Building into a venue for window theater with her site-specific public art project *Frente Feroz*. Before visiting the site of Amoros' creation, I had seen computer renderings of the all-night light show on her website. In the slick sequences, colors stream and change; huge rams lock horns, an elephant flashes by, vines snake along the panes, ferns sprout from the corners. Amoros' proposal is colorful and rich and fluid, like the location in which it is sited, the heart of a vibrant and diverse New York City neighborhood.

First, I was fascinated by the colorful idea: a project designed for the accidental viewer; daily commuters, neighborhood walkers and visitors can watch the looped animated sequence, and be pulled out of individual thoughts into a (communal) dream. A fantastic initiative; an exciting injection into an ebullient canvas. And yet, it takes a rare and inspiring installation to make a mark in such a location.

"I love Harlem," Amoros tells me later. "Harlem was always a very special place," a site of cultural and social diversity and collision, in a state of constant flux. "What really attracts me is the energy I feel walking on 125th street. That makes me feel alive." 125th street, or "the corridor," is the main artery of Harlem—it is a long commercial stretch, each door, store, and avenue, a branch that connects communities. It is a lesson in



variety: with the diversity of languages and cuisines, the street is already a projection space for people.

Amoros intends to capture the electricity of this neighborhood in her installation, which “is not about me, it is all about them, what the building has to say with its history and what the space has to say.”

Amoros drew inspiration for the work from her early childhood in Peru—“There, everything is very intense, the jungle and the mountains...I am attracted to some extremeness.” But it was the sponsor of this project, real estate developer Eugene Giscombe, who was the instigating force behind its conception. He has a passion for exotic animals—the animals that live with Giscombe on his property served as models for Amoros’ creations.

While this connection may sound strange to some, Amoros says that her interest is in where social history, scientific

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research and critical theory intersect. Her works are efforts to integrate those points of overlap. This combination is evident in *Frente Feroz*. With a minimalist and simple language—light, cutout shapes—Amoros tries to challenge people’s notions of personal identity and community. She sees her art as an “agent for empowerment to involve viewers from all different backgrounds and communities.”

This intention is underlined by her choice of title: *Frente Feroz* sounds exotic, alliterative, melodic even. It’s meaning, “ferocious front,” describes its appearance—wild animals in a store front—and many assumptions about New Yorkers, foreigners, and African-Americans—some see a “ferocious” exterior of an unknown, an other; yet the “ferocity” is just that, a “front,” an imposed facade, a prejudiced projection.

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At 9pm, at dusk, I saw *Frente Feroz* come alive. Each silhouette (the result of foam board cut-outs) flashes; the light behind the creatures pulses and sparks, animating the screens that cover the large windows. The resulting flora and fauna dance in rhythm as the colors change, not a little reminiscent of my former disco nights in the 80s. And Amoros likes to watch her audience as much as her creation: “I love people’s reactions. I like how people view it and what they think about it—Is there a party?”



The lights and creatures of *Frente Feroz* have a permanent home in the windows of the second-floor Harlem loft. And maybe someone might have the same idea as I had when I first saw the installation: these animals are as less scary and real to me than Maurice Sendak’s wild things are to Max. To create a permanent installation in a space of such history and energy is courageous and dangerous. I am afraid that the wild dancing creatures will be drowned out by the excitement of the streets, that the artificial lights are too pale in comparison with the color of the neighborhood; that the installation will be forgotten as it is integrated into the everyday. Amoros’ creation is colorful, inventive, and enjoyable, but not as inspiring as the space in which it is located. □

images: left page and this page, top: **Grimanesa Amoros**, *Frente Feroz*, 2005. Lighting Installation as seen from the street. Photos: Noe Martinez / bottom: **Grimanesa Amoros**, *Frente Feroz*, 2005. Lighting Installation as seen from inside the Lee building. Photos: Noe Martinez

