

Album

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GESCHE WÜRFEL

The Lairs of Super Men

AS MANY NEW YORK CITY apartment dwellers know, some live-in superintendents love to decorate the basements of their buildings. Whether this urge to adorn stems from a proprietary sensibility — what’s near the boiler room is mine! — or is simply the result of too many personal knickknacks spilling out of tiny living spaces, the “super cave,” with its birds, potted plants and blinking religious icons, is a phenomenon you have surely seen before.

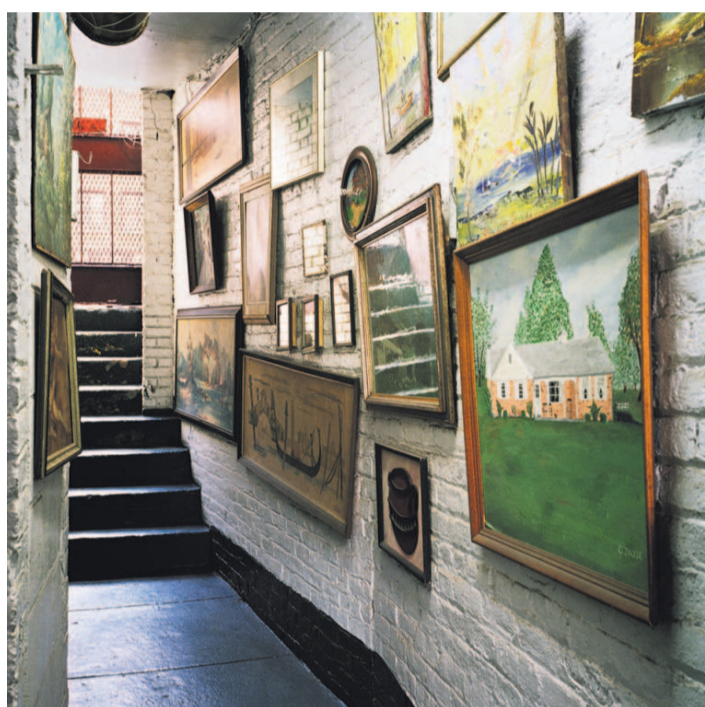
This spring, the photographer Gesche Würfel plans to publish “Basement Sanctuaries,” which documents a few dozen underground lairs that supers in the Inwood and Washington Heights sections of Manhattan have made their own.

The idea for the project came to Ms. Würfel in 2010 when she and her husband, Rahsaan Maxwell, were hunting for apartments in those neighborhoods and they stumbled across what looked like an altar in the basement of a building.

“I was amazed,” she recalled. “As a photographer, I’ve always been interested in weird spaces, places that are a bit more edgy.”

Canvassing the streets with her infant son, Nicholas, and later with a Spanish-speaking assistant, Ms. Würfel, 37 and a native of Germany, gained access to the supers’ private domains — basement dens filled with discarded furniture and artwork that looked as if it had been left behind by departing tenants.

“In most cases, they were happy to have someone interested,” she said. “I gave them the respect they deserved, and so they were thrilled to have me photograph their decorations.” **ALAN FEUER**



Gesche Würfel documented dozens of basements in Upper Manhattan apartment buildings. Clockwise from top left: the hallway gallery was made up of artwork that was found, thrown out or received as gifts; a tenant painted the wall in the basement and then the super made it his nook; a Beethoven poster and other art was given away; this building’s super is from the Dominican Republic, and the plants are both real and fake; a wall covering of Jesus in a laundry room.



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