

ART

Playground Art at the Arsenal and Julie Saul Galleries

By Alice Perry 5/24 6:49pm

City playgrounds are every parent’s savior and every kid’s kingdom, as design critic Kim Birks [reported](#) for Scooter in 2011. And they are also the muse and inspiration for two art exhibits on [view now](#).

Erik Benson’s show [The Park](#) at the [Arsenal Gallery](#) depicts playgrounds as both an oasis and an eyesore. Inspired by the playgrounds in his Bushwick neighborhood, Benson’s paintings focus on how playgrounds fit in or stand out in the urban landscape. In some of the works, florescent orange domes of jungle gyms jump out against Soviet-gray buildings in the background. In others, a construction fence blends seamlessly with playground equipment.

Benson’s acrylic paintings are highly textured—literally. (We challenge you not to want to touch.) His technique entails pouring paint onto a glass table, then cutting it after it dries into shapes and weaving the pieces into a collage. He adds layer upon layer to “build” the painting.

“When I was a little kid, I played with Legos a lot,” Benson explained at a gallery reception last night. “When I started [using this technique], it really struck a nerve with that. I was able to connect with the places in the paintings more.” Those teeny, tiny bricks in the paintings’ buildings? They are all painstakingly cut with an X-Acto knife, then lined up and added onto the canvas as if Benson were a bricklayer rather than an artist.

Children will love these large paintings of familiar settings. And what kid wouldn’t want to go to a building called “The Arsenal,” which once stored ammunitions? Located smack dab in front of the Central Park Zoo, the building’s third floor gallery is a kid-friendly spot: clean bathrooms, tables for snacks, and welcoming park staffers (rather than gallery owners who are allergic to children).

While Benson is inspired by playgrounds’ plasticity, **Charles Johnstone** finds art in their concrete and immovability. Johnstone’s photography exhibit [Some New York Handball Courts](#) at the [Julie Saul Gallery](#) looks at—you guessed it—handball courts in New York City. The static mugshot-esque images of cement walls and pavements are devoid of players, leaving no choice but to scrutinize these “2001”-like concrete monoliths.

What’s fun for kids is to look at the photographs’ similar settings and to point out how they differ, each handball court with its own personality. The wall may be chipped and cracking, freshly painted a Parks Department green, or dappled with shadows from a nearby maple tree. In some respects, Johnstone’s handball courts are as malleable and subject to change as Benson’s playgrounds.

While you're at the Julie Saul Gallery, peek at **Arne Svenson's** controversial exhibit *The Neighbors*, featuring photographs of unsuspecting New Yorkers in their apartments (don't worry: everyone is clothed). This gallery visit will not only inspire your kids to take photos of their own neighborhood playground, but you'll be right up to date on one of the most talked about gallery shows.

Erik Benson's The Park at the Arsenal Gallery (830 Fifth Ave) runs through June 20. The Arsenal is open Monday to Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Charles Johnstone's Some New York Handball Courts at the Julie Saul Gallery (535 West 22nd Street, 6th floor) ends June 29. The gallery is open Tuesday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.