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## Storm Art Damage Overwhelms Conservators in Wake of Sandy

*By Katya Kazakina - Nov 6, 2012 12:00 AM ET*



*Suzanne Siano, director of Modern Art Conservation, in her 7,000-square-foot facility, where power to her building has not been restored yet. "Mold is the biggest concern," she said. "You can get a lot of things restored after the water damage, but less will be restorable with mold." Photographer: Katya Kazakina/Bloomberg*

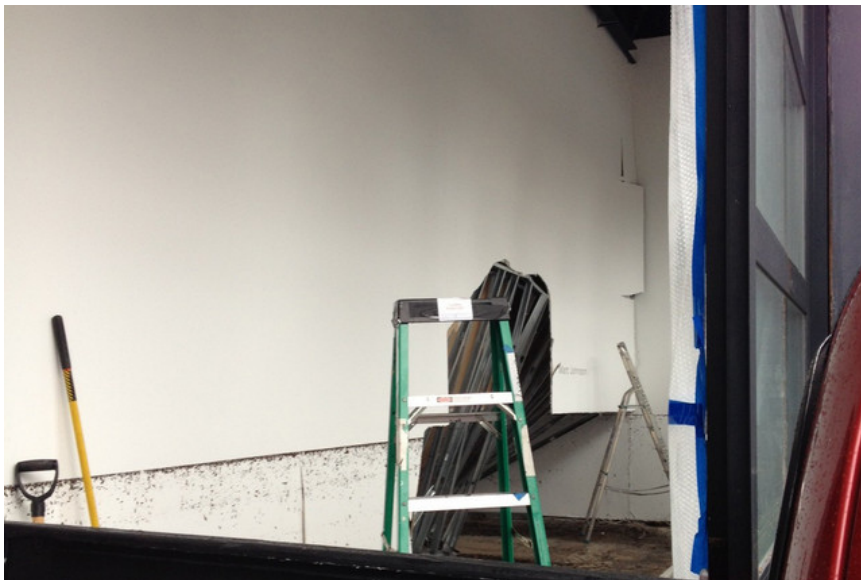
The Long Island City facility of Gloria Velandia Art Conservation has seen a steady arrival of damaged artworks ever since Hurricane Sandy flooded Chelsea's art district in New York.

Casualties included pieces by Andy Warhol, James Rosenquist, Lucio Fontana and Joel Shapiro, according to Chief Financial Officer Steve Ludmer, whose company lists on its website clients including major Chelsea galleries Pace, David Zwirner, Gladstone and Gagosian.

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*"Now we are at the stage of saving the works, said Michael Gillespie, owner of Foxy Production gallery. "Wet drawings will go into deep freeze storage." Photographer: Katya Kazakina/Bloomberg*



*A surge from Hurricane Sandy broke through the wall at 303 Gallery in Chelsea, flooding the gallery and damaging artworks. Owner Lisa Spellman quickly moved the art and her staff into an elevated space nearby where a makeshift conservation laboratory was set up. Photographer: Katya Kazakina/Bloomberg*

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*A week after Hurricane Sandy wrecked Chelsea's art district, 303 Gallery was fixing its flooded space. The damaged dry wall was removed. Photographer: Katya Kazakina/Bloomberg*

“It’s been nonstop,” he said. “Over the weekend we’ve assessed over 300 works of art.”

With basements and ground floor spaces filled with contaminated water, art conservation has been the top priority for galleries and artists.

Some dealers have set up on-site conservation laboratories. About 200 people attended a free emergency panel on conserving artworks damaged by flooding at the Museum of Modern Art last weekend.

“I would say thousands of artworks were affected,” said Christiane Fischer, president and chief executive officer of AXA Art for the Americas, which insures inventory at galleries, museums and private collections. “In its extent it’s completely unprecedented.”

## **Donning Gumboots**

Unable to reach clients by phone, Fischer and her staff made a list of 300 critical locations in Chelsea and downtown Manhattan. Donning gumboots, they set off in teams of two to assess the situation.

“The losses are severe,” Fischer said, on a conference call on Nov. 3. “First payments will be made as early as next week, especially when it’s the case of total losses.”

After the flood left behind wet canvases and a giant hole in the wall at 303 Gallery, owner Lisa Spellman quickly converted an elevated space nearby into a temporary conservation studio.

## **Preventing Mold**

Her staff laid out drawings, prints and photographs on long tables and turned on bright lamps, de-humidifiers and HEPA air scrubbers to help dry the works and keep mold from spreading.

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“Time is of essence,” said Spellman. “Conservators are overwhelmed.”

Some works received by Gloria Velandia measured as large as 5-by-12 feet, but there were also 6-by-6-inch artworks of “sentimental value,” said Ludmer.

“The water levels got so high that crates filled with artworks were floating in the basements of the galleries,” he said.

While valuable works are likely to get restored whenever possible, pieces by lesser-known artists could suffer.

“It’s sad because we know the work is restorable, but it’s too expensive,” said Suzanne Siano, director of Modern Art Conservation in Chelsea, whose fees range from \$1,000 to \$100,000.

## **’Total Loss’**

AXA’s Fischer said that if the cost of conserving the work exceeds its market value “we’ll consider it a total loss.”

Art dealer Zach Feuer, who had 550 artworks damaged by water in the flooding at his West 22nd Street gallery, is working with three different art restorers because “everyone is so backlogged,” he said.

He quickly moved the works to higher ground to dry and sent out others for restoration including a couple of secondary- market pieces with prices in the mid-six figures.

“I wish I could restore it all,” he said. “But what do you do with a \$500 print?”