Art on location

JERRY KEARNS' studio, two skinny flights up from a noodle factory in Lower Manhattan, is a broad shaft of space with a sunny, tin-ceiled workroom overlooking East Broadway. It may be more open than some painters' studios, because one of the things it must periodically contain is a dozen or so of Kearns' students, sitting around listening to the artists, critics, and gallery directors he's called in to help with "NYPOP."

Pronounced "En-Why-Pop" and standing for "Professional Outreach Program," NYPOP is an upper-division art course with its lab sessions in New York City. Its two sections take turns spending Friday and Saturday in the city under Kearns' supervision. Every few weeks he meets the full class in Amherst, hearing presentations and delivering critiques of their work. But the educational engine of NYPOP is the visits to the city, which students report to be intense.

Last semester they met, among other people, critic Lucy Lippard, sculptor Rona Pondick, video artist Gretchen Bender, and director Jose Freire of Fiction/Nonfiction Gallery. "That's the whole idea," says Kearns. "How do you do it. Who do you have to get to know. How do you go about presenting your work." He especially wants interested students to meet gatekeepers to "entry-level spaces." Last spring his students met director Jeannette Ingbennan of Exit Art. This winter six are included in a show of emerging artists at Exit's new space on Broadway.

One Friday last fall, Kearns was showing a visitor his latest work-in-progress: sleekly spray-painted reproductions of early American landscapes, "collaged" with modern news and cartoon imagery. These operatic landscapes, he said, "were really about real estate." The often-vast canvases would be toured up and down the East Coast (Northampton's Academy of Music was a venue) to be unveiled for impressed and attentive audiences. Comical as this collective, seated rapture sounds, there's something striking in the idea of collective focus on a nonmoving image.

An hour later, half a dozen students were demonstrating that this something still exists in some corners of our culture, as they sat munching on the bread, cheese, and fruit Kearns had set out for them and gazing at a wall on which slides were being flashed by Gerry Haggerty.

Haggerty is a New York artist, writer, and friend of Kearns since their grad student days in Southern California. He'd given the students half an hour of his perspectives on careers, criticism, and surviving in the city, which he encouraged them to go ahead and try if they're so inclined. They can probably live as well in Brooklyn as in Dubuque, he said, and from Brooklyn "you can go see the Matisse show as often as you can afford and the Magritte show as often as you want, because at the Met you only have to pay a penny." Plus, they can start developing the web of connections that begins when, for instance, "Jasper Johns is introduced to Leo Castelli by his downstairs neighbor Rauschenberg."

Now Haggerty was showing them images from Velasquez to Picasso, to illuminate some ideas about time, space, and painting he wanted them to have in mind before they tramped downstairs, into the subway and across town to visit painter Robert Birmelin.

Birmelin's studio, up another skinny flight of stairs over a deli on West 14th Street, is narrower than Kearns', and purely a workshop for the middle-aged painter. There's a refrigerator, a radio, and aisles and piles of finished canvases — large-scale expressions of Birmelin's slipping, sliding, snapshot view of the rush and tumble of urban life.

There's also a space for the painter to stand and work, and around this space, for the better part of the next hour, half a dozen students and Haggerty and Kearns would sit, stand, and hunker, looking attentively at Birmelin's panel-in-progress as he talked to them about his painting and his life as a painter.

"We have to take some responsibility!" Kearns had exclaimed to his visitor earlier in the day. "Some responsibility for the professional lives of our students!" He shows his students the things he's doing. Kearns added. "The things I'm doing, the things people I know are doing. I think that's the strongest teaching there is."