

Featuring frames

Simon Jones profiles three of New York's standout practices while on a trip to Manhattan

From a location point of view, Studio Optix on West 49th Street couldn't ask for much more. Situated just under the Rockefeller Center building, home to NBC studios, the area is awash with tourists, city workers and stars of TV and film. The Rockefeller Center has played host to Studio Optix for almost 20 years, but just over two years ago, the practice moved just a few doors to a larger unit. 'With the location bringing in so many people, I wanted to do something



The view from Manhattan

really special with the store, so we drafted in some top architects from Germany,' says owner and optometrist Mitch Cassel.

With the city so densely populated, space is at a real premium, which presented some interesting challenges in the build. *Optician* interviews Cassel in a testing room, which, on the face of it, has a minimalistic aesthetic and a bijou feel. It's only when Cassel

begins to slide out cabinets with testing equipment do you start to appreciate the ingenious design that has gone into the testing rooms and the store itself. 'We have over 6,000 frames in the store, but the majority of them are kept in bespoke drawers,' says Cassel.

When it comes to dispensing frames, patients are sat down at svelte, minimalist tables and the optician will pick a range of suitable frames. 'We try

to make it a more personal experience in terms of presentation of products. People can get lost when they don't really know what to gravitate towards,' says Cassel.

The practice has three optometrists, typically two on any given day and there is an emphasis on the medical care, says Cassel. 'One of best pieces of equipment we recently purchased was the Daytona from Optos, which has been fantastic for us,' he says.

The practice also plays host to Cassel's contact lens manufacturer, Custom Color Contacts, which specialises in prosthetic and coloured contact lenses for film and TV – including special effects lenses which shoot blood. As you would expect, the practice boasts a lot of celebrity patients, including Matt Damon, Robert de Niro and Nicholas Cage.

Relaxed and homely

Situated on the corner of Madison Square Park on Madison Avenue, 10/10 Optics also benefits from being in one of Manhattan's most desirable positions. At first glance the practice isn't recognisable as an optician and with only a few small sign written windows and awnings.

Founded by Ruth Domber and optometrist Stephen Rozenberg in 1979, 10/10 Optics has had a number of locations and had three practices



Studio Optix stocks over 6,000 frames, but with space at a premium most are kept in bespoke drawers



Featuring frames

in operation before finally settling down with one larger site on Madison Avenue. 'It's roomy and we have space to move around,' says Domber. The practice is split over two levels, with frames displayed upstairs and sight testing and on-site lab situated below street level.

The interior has a homely feel and Domber says it's a deliberate ploy. 'The store isn't "techno" or "vintage". I wanted to create an atmosphere where people felt relaxed – like they're at home,' she says.

This relaxing experience is carried over into the dispensing process, which she likens to buying jewellery. 'We bring the frames to the customer so they're not moving around – it's an experience for them and we specialise in providing them with a high levels of attention and service.

When it comes to frame and brand selection, Domber says she and her staff are led by what will look good on the patient and are not drawn towards brands. That said, brands in the store are diverse, from Anne et Valentin to German wooden frame manufacturer Herrlicht. 'I search for more artistic brands and look for colour. I also like it when there are design elements that identify a collection,' says Domber.

Rozenberg also specialises in ortho-



10/10 Optics specialises in artistic brands and colour

keratology and Domber says contact lens business at the practice is thriving thanks to his expertise.

While *Optician* was in New York at Vision Expo East, one of the hot topics of conversation was the impact that online frame retailer Warby Parker could have on the market – and many practitioners say that they have been asked to adjust or fix Warby Parker glasses after purchasing them. Domber isn't worried about any impact it could

have and instead thinks it provides more business opportunities. 'We actually met with them a while back as they needed locations that could "troubleshoot" for them, which is a major problem for the company. Nothing came of the meeting, but people that buy their frames are potential customers. If someone wants their PD measured, I'll do it, because they might come back. The more frames they sell, the more repairs and adjustments I'll have to do,' she says.

Neighbourhood watch

Tina Catherine in Chelsea is fairly removed from 10/10 Optics and Studio Optix in terms of the environment. The Chelsea area of Manhattan is regarded as one of the city's coolest areas with a varied cross-section of residents and the practice sets out to reflect that.

The brainchild of friends Christos Tsiplakos and Teddy Santis, the practice was established just over three years ago. Tsiplakos is the practice's optician, Santis is responsible for marketing and advertising and a local optometrist works two to three days per week. Tsiplakos' older brother also handles finances.

The name, Tina Catherine is a combination of Tsiplakos' and Santis' mothers' names. 'Greek mothers are very powerful in the household and our mothers are really strong women – characteristics which have passed on to us,' says Tsiplakos.

Customer service is paramount to the duo. 'Customer service these days pretty much sucks. If you phone a company, you speak to a machine for the first five minutes, not a person.' With this in mind, patients at Tina



The Tina Catherine practice is located in Chelsea, regarded as one of the city's coolest areas



Catherine get whatever they want, no questions asked. 'When you're spending a lot of money, you want to feel comfortable doing it and glasses are a really personal item so they need to be right,' he adds.

Inspired by the range and quality of eyewear on offer in the practice, Tina Catherine has also recently added its own brand of frames. The Japanese-made Chelsea frame comes in a variety of sun and ophthalmic options and gives patients the chance not only to identify with the practice, but with the vibe of the local area.

Being situated in such a switched on neighbourhood means that patients are more aware than ever about alternative sources for purchasing eyewear. Tsiplakos also takes a pragmatic view on online competition and Warby Parker: 'If someone needs a pair of their frames adjusting, I'll do it because that person will have friends and they might tell people about Tina Catherine. In this business word of mouth is everything,' says Tsiplakos.

Tina Catherine itself has turned to the internet. Its site includes a style and eyewear journal and a comprehensive catalogue of the eyewear available in the practice. Tsiplakos says there isn't



Tina Catherine offers customers the freedom to walk around and look at the frames

the room to keep all of the frames shown on the site in stock, but each model on the website is available to patients.

The design of the practice was carried out by an architect from Brooklyn. Tsiplakos and Santis made a very conscious decision to create an environment where customers feel they have the freedom to walk around

and look at frames – often without input from staff. 'Some of the customers don't even want your help,' says Tsiplakos. 'They either know what they're looking for or they're just seeing what's out there. In other stores, you have the optician running around choosing frames and they tend to pick what they think looks good, not what the patient likes or thinks looks good.' ●



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