

# ARTS SPACE

## No place like home

*Southtown celebrates  
Contemporary Art Month*

BY JOHN EWING

What is a neighborhood? Is it houses and schools? Jobs and services? Or is it a reflection of people who live in a particular place? Since 1991, "Art in the Hood" has expressed the imagination of Southtown, a community encompassing the Victoria Courts, Lavaca, King William, and South Flores neighborhoods. The official kick-off to San Antonio's Contemporary Art Month, "Art in the Hood" gathers the people and passions that distinguish this community for its July First Friday exhibition and celebration of the arts. But the festivities belie a serious effort to revive a decaying landscape.

At the Handy Andy on South Presa, a new mural by Robert Tatum has been completed in time for Contemporary Art Month. Depicting the Mission Trail, the mural gives a buoyant face-lift to a block of neglected buildings. The exhibition site of this year's "Art in the Hood" sits catercorner from Tatum's work at an old Ricos Candy manufacturer and store owned by the Liberto Specialty Co. Nothing more than storage space, the building sits with boarded-up windows and tall weeds in the parking lot. As in years past, the organizers of "Art in the Hood" have chosen a location on the edge of Southtown's revitalization. Like pied pipers, they will bring art, energy, and vision to an area that sorely needs it.

On a rainy afternoon, Oscar Alvarado and Catarina Sigerfoos give a tour of the charming storefront and the dark, cavernous warehouse behind. They describe its magical transformation for "Art in the Hood's" July 1 preview reception. The warehouse will be lit for artwork and performances. With help from artists Daniel Geisler and Henry Rayburn, huge metal racks will be converted into exhibition supports for works by children, amateurs, and established artists in the community. The building's walls will play host to film projections by Anjali Gupta, and madmedia — a local performance cooperative — will perform "Revolution Revelation" to a live DJ mix. Some of the city's finest chefs will provide a buffet, while Jesse Borrego's "Tribu de Muertos" fuses Latin percussion with local band Pseudo Buddha's avant-garde world beats. The entire environment will be treated to the atmospheric of fashion designer Ronald Kolodzie.

On July 2, the party spills into the street for First Friday's big opening of Contemporary Art Month. Gifted finalists from San Antonio's recent wave of poetry slams at the Reverb Lounge will take the main stage, followed by bands Sexto Sol and Slobber. Across South Presa Street, Richard Hailey and the Neon Stars will set up under the Pig Stand awning, and Eve Unbound will stake out the corner of Beauregard and Alamo Streets. Saturday morning, the Pig Stand diner will host an art workshop for children organized by Jump-Start Performance Company



Robert Tatum prepares "Art in the Hood" headquarters.

and SAY Si. Painting fire hydrants donated to the event by SAWS, the children will hold an auction of their work in the early afternoon. Proceeds from the preview reception and 25 percent of art sales will be matched through the City of San Antonio's Neighborhood Commercial Revitalization Program.

"Art in the Hood's" lively spectacle seems a world away from this bleak and deteriorating section of San Antonio. It is hard to imagine the thriving neighborhood it once was. "The freeway killed South Presa and South St. Mary's — that was the old way to get downtown from South San Antonio," says Oscar Alvarado, a neighborhood

### PRE-VIEW

**"Art in the Hood"**  
COST: \$20 reception Thurs., July 1;  
\$1 suggested donation Fri., July 2  
INFO: All Day/All Night  
First Friday listings, page 29

artist and co-chair of "Art in the Hood." Alvarado opposed a plan to raze the Liberto warehouse and surrounding structures for a new fire station. When he approached owner Rick Liberto with plans for the event, the owner's response was,

"You better come and see it first." The building was a greasy hodgepodge of peanut wrappers, conveyor equipment, and office stationery abandoned in mid-notation.

Enthused by the community's interest in the building, Liberto offered a crew and forklift to clear space for the event. He also took the property off the market. Catarina Sigerfoos, a King William resident, likens this move to other successful

See Hood, page 43

## Hood

From page 13

redevelopments of abandoned commercial spaces: Blue Star Arts Complex, Finesilver, ArtPace, Southwest School of Art & Craft, and the Carver Center's plans for the Friedrich plant, to name a few. Multi-use ideas combining arts and service businesses have already been proposed for the Liberto site, and Sigerfoos believes "Art in the Hood" planted the seed. "This was a viable commercial enterprise once," she observes, "There's no reason why it can't be again."

The community's dense population of artists is unique in San Antonio. Where they find vacant commercial spaces and cheap rents, artists have been making creative arrangements with property owners who are pleased to have their buildings once again occupied. And where people live and work, other businesses can begin to thrive. Over the last decade, this has spurred redevelopment along South St. Mary's, South Alamo, and South Flores Streets.

That artists prefer big, abandoned, run-down buildings to new prefab shouldn't come as a surprise. Making art is almost exclusively an act of transformation, of reclaiming and changing materials, ideas, and spaces. Aside from sparking interest with real-estate developers, neighborhood initiatives have also caught the attention of the Mayor's office and newly elected District One City Councilman Bobby Perez, who both supported this year's "Art in the Hood" with discretionary funds. What's the message here? Where people gather, things happen. ■

San Antonio Current, July 1-7, 1999