

ARTS SPACE

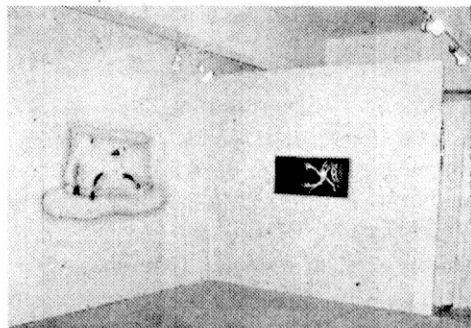


PHOTO COURTESY ARTPACE

Karen Mahaffey's space

A room of their own

Studios become galleries on First Friday

BY JOHN EWING

According to Virginia Woolf, turn-of-the-century women needed money and rooms of their own to write fiction. Not much has changed in a hundred years; today, the difficulties of a creative life are more equitably shouldered by men and women,

but professional success for artists still demands material resources and a healthy

measure of self-determination. In San Antonio, where commercial art galleries come and go like the seasons, artist studios moonlighting as exhibition spaces have routinely filled the gap.

Recent development of Blue Star Building "B" has doubled the number of artist studios in the complex, creating more "rooms" and more opportunities to expand San Antonio's visual arts community. Populux Commissary, Magical Realism Studio, Three Walls Space, and Santa Lucia Studio are new names lining the hallways. These venues join the list of established tenants who benefit from cheap rent and ample public traffic during First Friday. In fact, lease agreements stipu-

late First Friday openings, and all studios will participate in July's Contemporary Art Month.

With a coat of paint and better lighting, the first-floor corridor of Building "B" now looks like a destination rather than an afterthought. Michele Monseau, a Midwesterner with an MFA degree from UTSA, rents a large studio at one end. Monseau has built a divider to designate a quirky gallery space with a brick niche that she calls Three Walls. "My work isn't huge, and I wasn't utilizing all of the studio, so why waste it?" says the artist, who presented Veronica Fernandez's painted wooden cutouts for Three Walls' inaugural exhibition in May. A comic smack in the eye, Fernan-

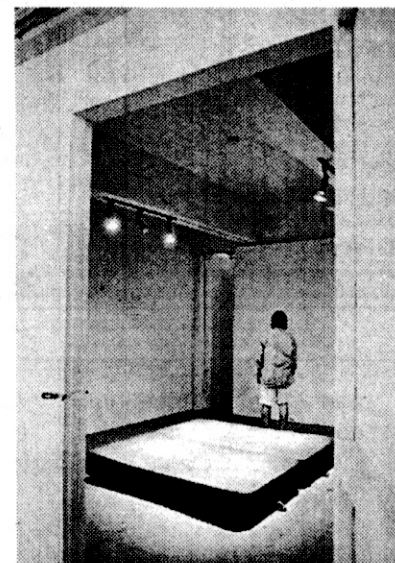


PHOTO BY TOMMY HULTGREN

Room by Veronica Fernandez

dez's graphic flattening of a fishing hat and colorful lures stretches a body of work committed to the abstraction of common objects.

"It's so hard to get yourself known," says Monseau, referring to the few exhibition opportunities in San Antonio. "If I can't find a place to show, I'm going to make one." Three Walls is already scheduled through the end of the year, but disappointments for the gallerist can be serendipitous for the artist: "If someone backs out on me, I'll fill the space. I have new work, and I want it to be seen." This is in fact the case for June.

Next to Three Walls, Leigh Anne Lester and Jayne Lawrence dedicate

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PRE:VIEW

First Friday
exhibitions and events

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Room with a view

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part of their studio to Cactus Bra Space. Someone jokingly suggested the name with inspiration from a sculpture by Lester. The joke stuck, and now the proprietors refer to themselves as “left and right boob.” With a continuous exhibition record since 1994, Lester and Lawrence are the veterans on the block. “People talk about San Antonio’s provincialism,” comments Lawrence. “They say the art scene is in New York or Los Angeles, or perhaps Chicago. But it will never happen in San Antonio. It may be idealistic, but I think, ‘Why not?’ All it takes is people and energy, artists being excited and people talking.”

Cactus Bra keeps the discussion lively, with exhibitions such as Karen Mahaffy’s “Without Ceremony” in May. Upholstered in crimson shantung, Mahaffy’s pair of small mattresses (or very large ottomans) generates physical and symbolic friction; somewhere between the raw appeal of an unmade bed and the salacious allure of a red petticoat, these objects confound

social mores as they defy categorization.

Alba De León’s Studio 106B, next to Cactus Bra, is perhaps the most multi-purpose in the group. But that’s a bittersweet circumstance; as an artist and educator at Palo Alto Community College, De León offers her space for student shows in order to make up for program deficiencies. “We don’t have an exhibition space at Palo Alto,” she admits. “There are many talented students in transition to the university or establishing themselves as artists who need a place to show for the first time. It’s vital that they become familiar with the process of putting work out for public response.” To that end, Studio 106B has mounted painting, sculpture, ceramics, and photography exhibits since 1996. Though De León provides guidance, the students are responsible for the success of the exhibition, from determining the number of pieces to advertisement strategy.

With degrees from Bennington College and the University of Alabama, De León is also a paper maker with the New York group, Trout Paper, and periodically shows their work in her studio. Wearing so many hats is challenging for an artist and a potential threat to a room of one’s own.

De León sums up the vicissitudes of opening a studio to the possibility of exhibition: “As a result of this article, I can have artists calling me who see this as a potential site. Then I’ll have to deal with that issue: Is this a gallery space, or is this still my studio?” ■