

# ARTS SPACE

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## Storm warning!

Neon artist lights up First Friday

BY JOHN EWING

In her South Presa Street studio, artist Cathy Cunningham struggles with a coil of neon tubing. She concentrates on one end while filling the other with glass beads, but a few of the costly pellets slip through her nimble fingertips. If not for the love of art, such a task could be maddening. Cunningham is experimenting with a new "crackle tube" technique, and the potential for error makes her nervous. There's no time for big mistakes.

Juggling her commercial sign business, an upcoming exhibition in Taiwan, and a commission for the San Antonio Convention Center's river-extension project, Cunningham is also feverishly preparing her First Friday opening of "Stormy Weather," at Blue Star's Cactus Bra Space. In San Antonio, news of the "crackle tube" has already hit the street. Unlike traditional neon, the glass beads create multiple pathways and obstacles to electricity, generating a brightly colored lightning effect inside the tubes of glass. The city's small neon community has sniffed out the innovation and is pumping Cunningham for information. "It's a patented process," she explains with a sly grin. "My contact in Las Vegas wouldn't discuss it, but he would answer 'yes' or 'no' to the right questions."

Asking the right questions is the bedrock of Cunningham's artistic practice. Subjected to fiery torches and high voltages, works in glass demand thorough knowledge, careful planning, and trial runs to get the bugs out. Or, rather, the impurities. A kiln is required to clean the bead-filled tubes and create the necessary conditions for the argon-neon mixture. The artist went to North Carolina to consult with a glass expert who helped construct the special kiln for her "crackle tube" experiment. Networking pays off in the small but rapidly developing world of art glass.

## Neon arts

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For Cunningham, the distinction between her commercial and fine art contacts is blurring. On scholarship in the mid-'80s at Dale Chihuly's Pilchuck Glass School near Seattle, the artist noticed that new disciplines were beginning to infiltrate the fine art curriculum. The hallowed tradition of glass blowing was slowing giving ground to mold casting, neon, and other techniques Cunningham has learned to utilize. In the parlance of the commercial trade, she is an accomplished "level five" tube bender (there are only six levels). Word is getting around about Cunningham the artist; too. In addition to a "A Gathering of Glass" currently in Wimberley, The Museum of Neon Art in Los Angeles is including a Cunningham piece in the exhibition, "Traveling Light," that opens in Hsin-chu City, Taiwan, in December.

At Cactus Bra, "Stormy Weather" promises to be as thought-provoking as it is visually dynamic. Suspended from the ceiling, a pale blue neon tornado will crackle with Cunningham's new technique. As if caught in the tornado's grip, three miniature houses hover around the

glowing spiral. One is mirrored, the second on rockers, and the third a tight web of thin, Pyrex tubing. References to dysfunctional family relations abound. But does the tornado lead the way in or out of familial chaos?

For Cunningham, family togetherness was an early and very real challenge. Her parents met in post-war Japan, where her father was stationed under General MacArthur. Returning home before his young bride, Cunningham's father paid a stranger to look after his wife and infant daughter on a cargo passage to the United States. They made it to Texas, speaking little English and seasick the entire journey. Proud of her brave, resilient mother, Cunningham draws inspiration from her maternal heritage. Japanese themes and characters have often appeared in her work, as well as other languages and symbol systems.

Outside her home she is constructing a tower which, when lit, will spell out a message in Morse code that can be seen from the Tower of the Americas. "We have landed; take us to your leader," the message says. Are you reading this, Whitley? ■

For more information on this and other First Friday exhibits, check All Day! All Night listings on page 24.



PHOTO BY TOMMY HILLGREN

Cathy Cunningham