

Ace in the hole (in the wall)

First Friday experiments at The Project Room

BY JOHN EWING

Tucked into a quiet strip of residential lofts and artist studios, The Project Room hides behind Building B at the Blue Star Arts Complex. On any given First Friday, this small exhibition venue might be the last stop revelers stumble upon as they wander toward their cars. For a tight-knit group of serious, young artists, however, The Project Room is often the most eagerly anticipated destination on the First Friday map.

Co-founded by Ethel Shipton and Tyler Linton in 1998, The Project Room was conceived as a series of one-night-only events over a three-year span. For artists who agree to participate, the venue provides unconditional use of Shipton's studio to surprise an audience made up mostly of peers, a challenge consistently surmounted for the past two years. With the work of UTSA student Randy Wallace, The Project Room begins its third and final year this First Friday.

"For me, it's all about conversation and communication," says Ethel Shipton, a Laredo native who studied art at UT Austin and relocated to San Antonio in 1997. Shipton considers The Project Room her three-year collaboration with a select cadre of San Antonio's brash and most active contemporary artists. By her design, the collaboration has had three specific phases: grassroots organizing, the visual art itself, and a forthcoming multi-volume document of the community experiment. "We decided to do it 'one-night-only' so that people would have to communicate in a more spontaneous and immediate way," Shipton explains. "What excites me most is how many artists use The Project Room as a chance to experiment. They move away from what they think they should be doing."

Tyler Linton met Shipton when both were working at the San Antonio Museum of Art. A graduate from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Linton was anxious to participate in the San Antonio arts community and supported Shipton's idea for an experimental art space. "It's a different experience for both artist and audience," says Linton. "For some, it's hard to put aside notions of what an exhibition is, or what a gallery is. A few artists have responded exactly as we hoped by doing something on the spot, specifically reacting to the space and the idea that it is only going to be for one night. Others have done it more traditionally by making a few things outside the space and bringing them in to hang on the walls." Linton focuses on producing the printed announcements for Project Room openings; according to Linton, the announcements are an additional opportunity for the artists to extend and personalize their experiments, "but some people get that more than others, just as some have gotten the idea of The Project Room



PHOTO BY TOMMY HULTGREN

Andréa Caillouet and Ethel Shipton, outside The Project Room studio and gallery space

more than others."

Hashed out over a table at Liberty Bar, the original plans for The Project Room piqued the interest of artists Collida Borgnino and Andréa Caillouet. A transplant from San Jose, California, Borgnino at one time rented The Project Room studio herself, and she welcomed the invitation to direct its second year. Making her choices from a specific "family of artists," Borgnino chose locals from the venue's small, dedicated following. Unabashedly "by, of, and for artists," The Project Room under Borgnino continued to offer an alternative to commercial galleries and large institutions. "It's about fun, not being so serious," says Borgnino, who credits the space with providing a pressure-free environment where artists "take risks in front of their peers." Although several participants resisted the single-viewing format, prompting a second-year "information sheet" for artists, Borgnino claims the formula is a success. "One night helps keep the work from being too overdone," Borgnino comments. "The artist doesn't get so caught up in the art, which makes it easier to not be so everlasting about it. They're prepared to get the idea across in a night."

While a student at UTSA, New Orleans

native Caillouet presented what could be called a model Project Room exhibit. Entitled "Lick," her multi-color grid was constructed from small rectangles of either chocolate or soap, each an indistinguishable "surprise" for viewers to take as souvenirs from an exhibition that changed by the minute. Like Borgnino, Caillouet agreed to direct The Project Room's third year as a way to support artists outside the institutional or commercial framework. Her goal is to alternate San Antonio artists with participants from other Texas cities. "I would like to have a mix," she enthuses. "It would be nice for everyone, and me personally, to get some new people in here; we know what we're doing!" She echoes the oft-heard criticism that an "incestuous" San Antonio art scene suffers from a dearth of new ideas.

Naysayers aside, the proliferation of artist-run spaces in San Antonio is a remarkable challenge to a governmental vote of "no confidence." The Project Room and its cousins (e.g. Sala Díaz, Cactus Bra, Three Walls, Gas Hall, and others) persevere without budgets or funding. A commitment to art in these circles isn't lip service; it comes out of the pockets of the

First Friday

From page 11

artists who shape them. When The Project Room mounts its final exhibit in December 2000, an important chapter in San Antonio's contemporary art history will be over. The documentation compiled in book form won't pay for itself, most likely, but as a record of a community's creative efforts it will be invaluable.

In our culture-war climate, the real surprise is that artists have any sense of humor left. "We try not to take it too seriously, but I don't think anyone takes it lightly," says Caillouet, describing the importance of artist-directed spaces. "People really use The Project Room to function outside of their own norm and not overburden themselves before they have a chance to create." Borgnino puts it more simply: "It's a lot of work, but it's a labor of love." ■

For more information on The Project Room and other First Friday venues and exhibits, consult listings on page 19.



L.A. David's dream-date scenario for First Friday