

ARTS SPACE

What price beauty?

Shopping First Friday at Blue Star Arts Complex

BY JOHN EWING

As the calendar speeds toward Contemporary Art Month in July, San Antonio visual artists kick into high gear, with exhibitions coming and going at a furious pace. At the Blue Star Arts Complex, April was a busy month, but May turns up the heat in anticipation of Art in the Hood, among other upcoming arts extravaganzas happening in the King William District.

Sandwiched between the New Orleans-based artist Willie Birch and the Spanish "New Wave", Blue Star Art Space held its Ninth Annual Red Dot Sale and Party on April 9. The food was tasty, and the beer flowed well into the night, but don't get the wrong idea: "Red Dot" was not about food, festivities, or even the finer points of art exhibition. To its credit, it never is. A cattle call of local contemporary artists, the Red Dot fundraiser matches affordable art with interested collectors, and the artists split profits with the institution. With few exceptions, most works were priced around \$500 and could slide into the back of a Chevy Suburban.

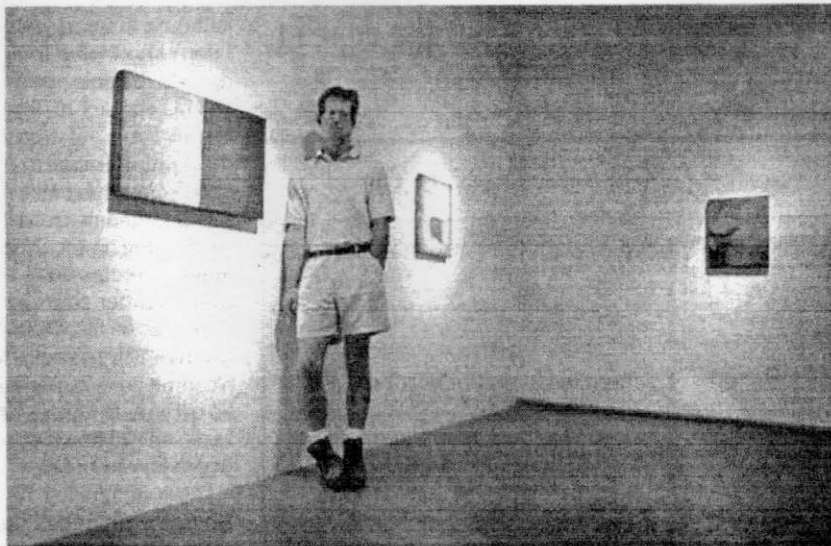
Relying on a simple formula, Red Dot staffed the lively party with volunteers who took credit cards and wrote receipts. By the end of the evening, the gallery walls were speckled with red-dot stickers tagging the paintings, photographs, and sculpture that sold. Nominated for the show by 50 local collectors and arts professionals, many of the more than 130 artists

chosen were in attendance and supporting each other's work on the gallery floor. In contemporary art, every sale is a good sale; it represents compensation for a collective effort that all too often goes unrewarded.

Blue Star Art Space staff freshened up the gallery walls for Red Dot and thoughtfully grouped related pieces when possible. A row of figurative works featured several standouts. Scott Lifshutz's delicate, untitled gouache portrait in pale pinks and blues and John Alberts' Hopper-esque *Visit* whetted a broad appetite for painting. Other fine pieces were lost in the crowd, like Rebecca Holland's minimalist *Fruit* (a small pair of rubber works on wood) and Mark Semmes' impressionistic *Forest Duet* (an equally small pair of oil-on-canvas landscapes).

Red Dot, by nature, can never be entirely satisfying as an exhibition. There are too many pieces, a clash of styles, and an uneven quality of work. But this art bazaar atmosphere might encourage sales; the variety appeals to almost every taste, and the single representative work by each artist generates a one-of-a-kind, get-it-while-you-can cachet.

Contrast Red Dot with the upcoming First Friday opening of "Viewfinder: Contemporary Art from Spain." The evolution of the art experience for collectors and the public at large becomes shockingly clear. From conventional



Scott Gordon, artist, is pictured with some of his work at the Joan Grona Gallery in the Blue Star complex. Gordon resides in Houston.

PHOTO BY TOMMY HULTGREN

PRE:VIEW

First Friday art openings and events

WHEN: May 7

INFO: All Day/All Night
"First Friday" listings

"pictures at an exhibition," Blue Star Art Space will next host a multi-disciplinary, multi-national, multi-site exchange of ideas that starts in San Antonio and travels to Spain and other European destinations. In addition to the four up-and-coming Spanish artists who will exhibit at Blue Star and workshop with Jefferson High School students, there will

be an ongoing collaboration between San Antonio artists and the traveling Spanish "museum" (known as Centro de Arte Ego) throughout May.

At the opposite end of the Blue Star Complex The Project Room continues to offer its own unique First Friday experience. Local artists have free rein and a "one-night stand" to engage the public. Founders Ethel Shipton and Tyler Linton are documenting each artist's night and will publish a catalogue raisonné at the end of The Project Room's short, influential life. This Friday, Alex de León, one of San Antonio's favorite agents provocateurs, will present new work in a show entitled "Stranded."

In April, Phillip Avila's "Octopusilanimus Garden" opened First Friday at The Project Room with a beautiful profusion of construction paper ephemera. Purple and pink origami octopi floated up one wall; elsewhere, photocopies of an octopus underside, with tentacles and suckered orifice, spilled down around a series of computer-painted octopus portraits. These soft, androgynous octopi are escape artists perfectly adapted to their environment. In an undersea world governed by different rules, Avila's work challenges gender values as well as conventional art practices. Unsigned and unpriced, the fragile paper materials question the endurance and commodity value of art,

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further destabilizing the relationship art objects have to commerce.

By sheer coincidence, other Blue Star galleries also presented artists in April who play with space, the physical life of materials, and the commodity value of art. Joan Grona Gallery pulled people indoors with live music, air-conditioning, and the seductive surfaces of Scott Gordon and Meredith Dean. Dean's *Femme* series uses pigmented stucco on wood to create colorful and moveable, quilt-like systems of commonplace symbols. Layers of stucco are built up and scraped to resemble the eroded exteriors of public spaces. Busy and humorous, these wall pieces read like multiple, unfixed histories of daily life.

In contrast, the elegant surfaces of Scott Gordon's paintings are less about the meaningful accumulation of symbols but, rather, how time mutes or nullifies the significance of human marks. In a series of oil enamel works on paper, Gordon layers dark, complementary hues, then frustrates the lustered surfaces with scrapings, rubbings, and freehand scrawls. In the manner of Cy Twombly, these lists of numbers, words, and graphic doodles are the effluvi-um of a world at full tilt, not its last and best record. Additional works incorporate wax, further muting the significance of human marks until the active textures, sheen, and colors of these gorgeous surfaces dominate entirely. This Friday, Joan Grona

Gallery presents painter Katie Pell, multi-media artist Felix Padrón, and poet/musician/artist Don Stewart, whose Wagging Tongues ensemble will perform at a reception for the artists Sunday afternoon.

Up the walk from The Project Room and behind Blue Star Art Space, the UTSA Satellite Space presented David Jablonski's MFA thesis exhibition in April. Like the work mentioned above, Jablonski's large, abstract paintings and prints also challenge spaces, materials, and surfaces conventionally associated with art making. In his paintings, crude and generous pools of bright color are riddled with tracery systems of controlled drips. This liquid mayhem plays against the regularized patterns of the printed bed sheets used as painting surfaces. Likewise, the prints on paper are both controlled and crudely spontaneous. Abstract "templates" carved into wooden veneer were exhibited as works of art along with the prints. Scuffed, wooden disks used to create circle forms on the prints were scattered across the gallery floor like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Throughout the run of the show, these disks were freely kicked about, generating new, Calder-esque compositions with each visitor.

Too intimidating, mystifying, or downright breathtaking, challenging work often does its job too well, distracting the new or small-time collector from the buying impulse. For every objective there is a strategy. Contemporary art in San Antonio struggles to survive somewhere in between the sublime and "cash 'n' carry." ■