

# We're only in it for the art

BY JOHN EWING

The Texas Association of Museums (TAM) held its annual meeting in San Antonio the first week of April, drawing delegates from across the state with the theme, *Museums: Redefining Community*. TAM's official program, referring to the Internet, stated that "community" is no longer defined by simple geographic boundaries. Despite the spirited acknowledgement that "today's communities are where you find them," most of the conference participants missed opportunities to study the subject firsthand. Though sparsely attended, two lively panels demonstrated that living communities always involve need, change, and at times, conflict.

Only a handful of visitors turned out for a presentation organized by Clint Willour, executive director of the Galveston Arts Center, with five San Antonio artists who operate alternative exhibition spaces. Sharing

anecdotes and finishing each other's sentences, the panel members offered unguarded slices from a broad local history organized around the studios and living spaces that moonlight as galleries.

"When I came to UTSA in 1988, it should have been called the University of Texas near San Antonio," joked Ken Little, an artist and sculpture professor. "We opened the UTSA Satellite Space to get students involved in the art community downtown. *Alternative* means you do it because you love it, and you survive on the money and people you can pull together to make it happen," said Little, whose Downtown warehouse gallery, *Rose Amarillo*, hosted memorable installations, happenings, and group shows of local artists through the late '90s.

In King William, Sala Diaz has picked up where *Rose Amarillo* left off, and alternates local artists with out-of-town guests. Director Hills Snyder calls the gallery "a family thing," crediting its success to a network of



Left to right: Leigh Anne Lester, Ethel Shipton, Michele Monseau, Hills Snyder, and Ken Little. (Not pictured: Carla Stellweg and Clint Willour)

friends who host and publicize exhibitions. Though grassroots and non-profit, the small space has garnered national and international press and been invited to the 2002 ARCO contemporary art fair in Madrid.

Other spaces have sprung up in a cluster of studios at Blue Star Arts Complex and share the heavy First Friday crowds. For three consecutive years, The Project Room made creative use of the "one-night-only" traffic, inviting artists to experiment in a "huge collaboration of visual and word-of-mouth communication," said founder, Ethel Shipton. Cactus Bra Space directors Leigh Anne Lester and Jayne Lawrence also encourage their peers to take risks with their

work. "We want people to push themselves and push the envelope as well," said Lester. Michele Monseau of Three Walls echoed the sentiment: "I'm willing to take risks because I'm not superfunded by an endowment or a board of directors, and I have no overhead except my rent." Like the above artists, the UTSA graduate turned half of her studio into a gallery space scheduled with shows up to a year in advance.

The session's small audience scrutinized



Alma López, *Our Lady, Irisglíce on canvas*, 14" x 17.5", 1999

the chummy panel as if it were a rare bird in captivity. One delegate asked how the artists measure the success of their exhibition spaces. "We're happy if the artist is happy," said Lester, expressing the "art for art's sake" credo linking the mutually supportive spaces. "But at the very least we want a good response from the people who come through and from the community we live in."

The number of alternative spaces in San Antonio reflects a community that continues to grow. That's surprising for a city with few institutional or commercial venues showing contemporary art, and even fewer patrons. Panelist Carla Stellweg, Executive Director of Blue Star Art Space, contrasted the San Antonio scene with earlier alternative spaces in Los Angeles and New York. "Regardless of the fact that there is no art market or group of people fighting for a particular cause, this is a community brought together by the artists themselves, the work they do, and the energy of their creativity." Stellweg's organization was founded by local artists dissatisfied with San Antonio's pre-existing institutions.

Even fewer TAM delegates showed up at the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center for the panel "Contemporary Art in a Community-Grounded Setting." Cruz Ortiz, Mural Project

coordinator for San Anto Cultural Arts Center, discussed the positive role public art projects play in the lives of West Side youth. Joanna Bigfeather, Director of the Institute of American Indian Arts, spoke about contemporary artists who are caught between the commercial tastes of the Santa Fe "Indian Market" and the tribal "Art Police" who control the production of traditional forms.

But it was East Los Angeles artist Alma López who provided the most striking portrait of communities in conflict. Her digital photograph, *Our Lady*, included in the exhibition *Cyber Arte* at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, has provoked recent protest from religious groups and Catholic Archbishop Michael Sheehan, who is calling to have the piece removed from display. While the discussion continues, the Museum does not seem likely to accede to the demands. Defending her image of a semi-nude *Virgen de Guadalupe* draped with roses, López challenged the church's claim to ownership of the very public symbol. As usual, when different communities vie for control of ideology, art is the battleground.

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