

ARTS SPACE



PHOTO BY TOMMY HEDGECOCK

Joe Salazar gets ready for your visit to First Friday.

First Friday superfriends

Businesses anchor art walk at South Alamo

BY JOHN EWING

First Friday can be habit-forming. By the thousands, locals and tourists pour into Southtown one night a month to enjoy art, music, and the city's liveliest party outside of Fiesta. If Blue Star Arts Complex is First Friday's epicenter, the edges of Southtown are where to find the funky, late-night aftershocks. Each month, the crowds grow larger around these border venues, from South Flores' ONE9ZERO6 (1906 S. Flores) to a small row of studio galleries just south of downtown. Salazar Studio (726 S. Alamo), IV ArtSpace @ IV Design (730 S. Alamo), and The Artist Asylum (732 S. Alamo) stake out First Friday's leading edge as it opens from downtown onto South Alamo Street. A diverse "welcome wagon," these three neighbors are eager to make a memorable first impression.

"Instead of just pretty pictures, we try to put on a show," says Joe Salazar, a photographer who stages extravagant photo shoots for the public in his studio. "First Friday is an open

house for everybody." Small, fast, and quick to laugh, the jovial Salazar is fondly called the "pioneer" of Southtown by his neighbors. "When people think of First Friday, they automatically think Blue Star," Salazar observes, "but in reality we're the opening gate to the event. I try to motivate everyone in the building to be more visible and get more exposure." Salazar opened his business in 1995 just as First Friday stepped up its move out into the neighborhood.

With a cunning knack for promotion, Salazar studies the bands that come to his studio for publicity shots. The interesting ones are invited to exchange services for a First Friday performance in the adjacent parking lot. Past shows have included jazz musicians, rappers, and local phenom DJ Jester, and this First Friday will feature Speeder, a spunky and very busy San-Anto rock band. Salazar also scouts the club scene for unique tattoos, piercings, or fresh style, populating his Friday night sessions with hair and makeup artists. "We let the public see there's a lot involved in taking pictures," Salazar explains. "People ask what cameras I use, how I get certain effects, but it's more about knowing types of film, being consistent, and putting your

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own creativity into it.”

Having studied design and photography in Colorado, Salazar returned to Texas to work for a Houston modeling agency. At his parents' urging, he came home to San Antonio and a job at Kelly AFB. “In one day, I'd shoot a head shot for a general, parts of a plane, then instructional slides,” Salazar remembers. “There was nothing creative about it, but they allowed me to check out top-of-the-line equipment. I would never have been able to afford and play around with it on my own.” Next, he worked his way through different departments to eventually manage River City Silver, a local photography company favored among artists. “Kodak would ask me to try out 10 rolls of a new film. I'd experiment with processes outside the normal ranges, but you can only go so far working for somebody else.” These days, he takes pictures for himself, including art photography, location shoots, and the occasional, late-night session with drag performers. “I give people what they want, but I'm careful to make sure I get something I'm going to be happy with. I'm not just shooting to shoot.”

Next door to Salazar Studio, IV ArtSpace @ IV Design is another business carving its own niche in both commercial and fine art circles. In search of a downtown location, Joey Hladek and his partners opened their design company on South Alamo in June 1998. They quickly discovered the space was too small for their production work; instead of moving, they turned the problem into possibility, opening IV ArtSpace in the front of the building, moving the office to the back, and taking production off-site. Though he's savvy beyond his 25 years, did the young businessman make a wise decision? “Oh, definitely, for what the gallery has become!” says Hladek. “My partner and I are artists. We wanted to be a part of First Friday, and at first it was just our work for a few months. Then the gallery started to generate a population and sales, and has turned into a full-time job itself. Plus, we get a really cool office.”

It's not unusual for the space to draw 600 to 800 people over a First Friday evening. But with most galleries closing at nine p.m., IV ArtSpace and neighbors make their pitch to a late-night audience. “I've always been frustrated by First Friday's early hours,” says

Hladek. “It can start as an early function, but it doesn't have to end early. From six to eight, you get the older crowd; they look like my parents and want to participate in the art scene before going to dinner. Nine to 11 is when our friends start showing up, and the majority of our sales are between 10:30 p.m. and 12:30 a.m. With longer hours and music, we can cater to all age groups. It's great to see the collaboration between the music and the visual arts; the only way it's going to work is if the arts support each other.”

Helping develop powered wheelchairs for his stepfather's company, Hladek dove into the design business as a teenager. Forgoing college, he learned engineering, drafting, and design skills along the way, and opened his own company at age 23. The firm's first project was a 30-foot-wide, wall-mounted sculpture for the now defunct PowerHouse Café — the piece launched IV Design. Since then, the partners have tackled toy design, patent prototypes, a line of stainless-steel housewares, and most recently, digital video and CD-ROM design. Management of the gallery has been turned over to curator Frank Leal and to Hladek's sister, Stefunny, but First Friday is still a team effort, as IV ArtSpace prepares an exhibition of Katherine Brown's digital collage works. Hladek describes the upcoming show as having a San Antonio mood: “If we count our art community as a part of what we're paying per square foot, we couldn't get this deal anywhere else. That's how I justify the cost of working down here, although a bookkeeper wouldn't like to hear that. But mood is everything. That's what keeps you going.”

The Artist Asylum is the newest tenant in the building. Like Salazar Studio and IV ArtSpace, the new gallery was born out of passion for artistic independence. Bernice Appelin-Williams, Mark Barnes Jr., Anthony Guillen, and David Garcia are business partners in the venture, but they began as artists who happened to be friends. “We took a trip together to Houston to visit the Rothko Chapel, another artist safe haven,” Barnes recalls. “It was a pilgrimage to renew our spirits, and coming back we discussed getting together for an exhibition.” Garcia stays busy with SAYSi and a ceramics foundry shared with Guillen, who operates Gallery 35 in Lytle. When Gallista Studio moved to South Flores, the vacated space on South Alamo was open to the group. “The location

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Stefunny Hladek, Frank Leal (center), and Joey Hladek from IV ArtSpace @ IV Design

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was ideal, the publicity was built-in, and spiritually it was time," says Appelin-Williams. "Here was the opportunity — you don't get it knocking on your door too often."

An urban studies instructor at St. Phillips College, Appelin-Williams is also an artist and independent curator. In the latter role, she has encountered censorship, most recently with a Women's History Month exhibit at the Carver Center entitled "As the Womyn Turn — Not Just Another Soap." Several images depicting nudity were draped with black cloth and a disclaimer, a compromise worked out through discussions between the artists in the show and the gallery director. "It was great for the artists because people were extremely curious to see what was behind the curtain," Williams explains. "With our own space, we haven't signed

anything saying we won't show certain artists or certain types of work. Sometimes you need to shock the public, whatever your subject matter is. That's what Artist Asylum means!"

"As the Womyn Turn, Part II" is The Artist Asylum's March exhibition, again celebrating Women's History Month. In February, the partners mounted a multi-artist, work-on-paper show entitled "Heart Culture," providing gallery visitors a chance to collaborate on a large wall piece. "Everyone had a lot of fun," says Barnes, "but it also caused them to think on a higher level, to reflect on black history and how it fits into their lives." In this way, First Friday becomes a site of community potential, a space to gather, communicate, and break down cultural barriers. If for one night only, First Friday is most successful when it offers San Antonio a richer experience of itself. ■

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