

San Antonio Art: Down-Home and World Famous

BY ALIX OHLIN

Sala Diaz, one of the best art galleries in San Antonio, doesn't look like much from the outside. It takes up one half of a dilapidated white house that sits slouched on a shady street about a mile south of the sprawling downtown. Northwards, tourist attractions like the Alamo and the Riverwalk bring noisy busloads of school children and families snapping pictures, but here the streets are torn by construction and hard to navigate. A leafy tree hides the sign in the window; if you didn't know better, you'd think this house was the same as any other in the neighborhood.

But inside, instead of furniture, neat rows of fuzzy, rainbow-colored wool balls lie carefully arranged on the hardwood floors of the front room—a piece by San Antonio artist Michele Monseau. Hills Snyder, the director of Sala Diaz and himself a recognized artist, is a soft-spoken man with long graying hair who moved down from Austin nine years ago, looking for a less hectic place to live. “The culture is pretty diverse, and it is fairly inexpensive to live here,” Snyder said. Cheap living, along with the art program at UT-San Antonio and a proliferation of galleries, have made San Antonio a flourishing place for artists. Studios are easy to find, the traffic is light, and artist-run “alternative spaces” seem to be everywhere. Sala Diaz was created by another artist, Alejandro Diaz, who decided to withdraw his living quarters to the kitchen and use the front space

of his house as a gallery. When Diaz left to attend the Curatorial Studies program at Bard College in New York, Snyder took over the space.

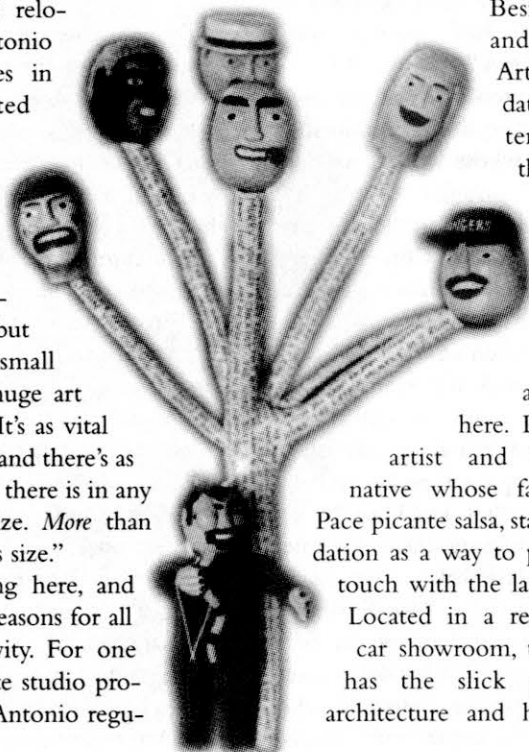
Frances Colpitt, a critic and independent curator who writes for *Art in America*, stopped by to view Monseau's work while I was visiting Sala Diaz. She'd heard from the graduate students she teaches at UT-San Antonio about one of Monseau's pieces, a sculpture made from cat whiskers the artist collected from her own pet and those of her friends. “That's not all that many cat whiskers,” she reported after touring the house. “I'm not all that shocked.” Colpitt relocated to San Antonio from Los Angeles in 1990 and started teaching contemporary art at UTSA. “For a fairly small town—San Antonio has a million plus people, but it acts like a small town—there's a huge art scene,” she said. “It's as vital and as interesting and there's as much going on as there is in any other city this size. More than any other city this size.”

Art is blooming here, and there are several reasons for all this creative activity. For one thing, the graduate studio program at UT-San Antonio regu-

larly produces artists, and many of them stay in town after graduating. For another, the BlueStar Arts Complex, a compound of galleries located on South Alamo, has established itself as a strong presence in San Antonio over the past 15 years. The complex also holds a large restaurant and stores selling folk art, jewelry, and other trinkets, as well as Say Sí, a non-profit program that gives high school students a place to make art. Interspersed among these are studios rented by artists, some of which have been partially cleaned out and turned into galleries. Not far from BlueStar, in a converted factory now painted deep purple, is Finesilver, a serious commercial gallery representing artists from San Antonio and elsewhere. The Finesilver building is warehouse-sized, large enough to hold a two-story gallery as well as office space rented to local companies. Finesilver's owner, Chris Eick, envisions a restaurant there too one day. When I visited, Finesilver was showing work made out of coffee filters and tea bags by Ana Prado, photographs by Olga Adelantado, and “Tentacus,” by Stacey Neff, a row of pale plastic phalluses twisting at eye level on the wall.

Besides BlueStar and Finesilver, ArtPace, a foundation for contemporary art that opened in 1995, is frequently mentioned as a landmark in the history of the art community

here. Linda Pace, an artist and San Antonio native whose father invented Pace picante salsa, started the foundation as a way to put the city in touch with the larger art world. Located in a renovated 1920s car showroom, the foundation has the slick post-industrial architecture and hushed, formal



interior of a museum in a much larger city. Neither museum nor gallery, ArtPace brings in artists for two-month residencies; they receive studio spaces, apartments, and stipends for materials and living expenses. At the end of the residency, the foundation displays their work. Each residency period accommodates three artists: one from Texas, one from somewhere else in the United States, and one from another country. Some of the art world's biggest names—from the influential feminist artist Carolee Schneeman to the painter Leonardo Drew—lived and worked alongside artists from central Texas. “ArtPace has made a huge difference, and [Linda Pace’s] support of San Antonio has really helped give the artists confidence in what they’re doing,” Colpitt said. Guest curators from major galleries and museums choose the artists for the residencies. As part of the selection process these curators make studio visits in San Antonio, Austin, and Houston. “All these national and international curators are coming to studios in this area,” said Gregory Sandoval, ArtPace’s program coordinator. “People in New York or Los Angeles would give their firstborn to have some of these people walk through their doors.”

Several San Antonio artists have risen from the scene to national prominence. Dario Robleto, whose work is strongly influenced by popular music, has recently had shows in Paris, San Francisco, and at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston. Franco Mondini-Ruiz, a native of San Antonio, used to run an evolving combination-art-and-thrift store called Infinito Botanica and A Gift Shop, which he turned into an installation at ArtPace by arranging a medley of candles, medicines, and knickknacks on pedestals and offering them for sale. Now living in New York and represented by a gallery there, Mondini-Ruiz was recently named “one of the fifty most beautiful people” by the hipster magazine *Paper*. Rebecca Holland, who works with subtle architectural details,

recently received a prestigious award from the Pollack-Krasner Foundation, which offers financial support to working artists.

Proximity to ArtPace and the level of attention it receives have increased the visibility of smaller art spaces. Sculptor Leigh Anne Lester turned her Bluestar studio space into a gallery called Cactus Bra. “We created our own opportunity,” Lester said, when she and other artists saw the amount of art-world traffic coming through San Antonio. “ArtPace was bringing people through,” she said, and other galleries could take advantage. Cactus Bra started out showing Lester’s work and the work of her co-founder, Jayne Lawrence. They didn’t have enough pieces to want to show every single month, so they started opening the space to other artists. Because it is a non-profit, Lester said, the artists who show at Cactus Bra have more freedom to experiment and the gallery is able to house installations that fill the entire room. There can, however, be problems when artist-run spaces vastly outnumber commercial galleries. One thing that’s missing from San Antonio is an active body of collectors to buy the work made there. Artists often have to look outside of the city, to galleries in Houston and Dallas, for their sales. Finesilver took some of their clients to the Chicago Art Fair this year; pieces by one of them, a recent UTSA graduate named Kim Squaglia, sold out. But in San Antonio sell-out shows are few and far between. The advantage of a non-profit space is the creation of adventurous work that leads artists into new directions, and installation shows that people enjoy viewing. The disadvantage is that artists often end up working as bartenders and showing out of their studios instead of being able to sell their work.

The work being produced in San Antonio doesn’t exhibit a strong regional character, or focus on a particular medium, although critics and curators do point out an emphasis on materials. Artists appear more interested in

the subtleties of textiles or vinyl than in the expression of political content. There is, Colpitt said, “still a really strong tradition of Chicano art here,” and the predominantly Hispanic population of San Antonio is reflected in the art community. By and large, however, there is no single school. If there is a trait unique to San Antonio it may be the gregariousness of the artistic community; the prevalence of artist-run spaces creates a social, even insular, atmosphere.

“It’s just a very cooperative scene amongst some of the artists, and we’re always there for each other, and we party with each other. We play and work together, that’s what this world is to me,” Hills Snyder said. Every artist in San Antonio seems to either work or hang out at the Liberty Bar, an airy, open restaurant inside a slanted Victorian clapboard house off Highway 281, just north of the Pearl Brewery. At the Liberty Bar, or at Sala Diaz openings—which are legendarily run, often include bonfires, and last late into the night—artists meet, drink, and share ideas. “All of a sudden there’s all this vinyl, or everybody’s singing a cappella in performances,” said John Ewing, a writer who covers art for the *San Antonio Express-News* and several magazines.

But the crux of the scene, said Gregory Sandoval, is that “artists can afford to live here and do their work, and pay out-of-pocket for their work even though it might not necessarily sell. And they can have a number of shows.” In this respect, home-grown spaces like Sala Diaz and Cactus Bra may be at the forefront of a trend away from the traditional centers where art meets commerce. “People can no longer afford to go to New York or Los Angeles and try to get quote unquote discovered,” Sandoval said. “They are staying close to home, they’re putting their monies into doing their own galleries, finding their own alternative spaces, getting their work seen there.” ■

Alix Ohlin has fled the state of Texas. Authorities are on the lookout.



First Friday in Southtown, S.A.

Top left: The BlueStar Arts Complex

Top right: Artist Paco Faci at BlueStar

Left: Sculpture al fresco on Alamo Street

Below: Students from SAY Sí media arts program

