

BILL'S JUNK: A STUDY IN LIVING WITH ART

by Bill Davenport

“Art can be disappointing, but junk always exceeds your expectations” is one of many mottoes at Bill’s Junk. Its tiny Heights storefront is painted like a castle, but inside it’s more like a closet: crowded with paintings, scraps, relics, driftwood, and bric-a-brac. Like its motley contents, the shop itself avoids labels; whether it’s a store, a gallery, an installation, or an event depends on what you’re looking for.

It began as my yard sale! In 2009, Francesca Fuchs and I had just finished renovating the building at 1125 E 11th Street, and had leftover lumber, doors, and hardware. I put everything I wanted to get rid of out on the sidewalk on Saturdays. I also had a twenty-year accumulation of thrift store art, and I started putting that out on the sidewalk, too.

I was also tired of storing my own old work. Like most artists, I had a garage full of pieces gathering dust. I decided I wasn’t going to do that anymore. Anything I didn’t want, whether I made it or not, was going out the door. Why should there be one rule for artworks by other people, and another for my own? Out on the sidewalk!

As the great sell-off began, people started to come by, then more people. Some were passers-by, but many were artworld acquaintances who gathered like vultures for

a share in the spoils. One of them was Toby Kamps, then a curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He proposed putting the store in the museum as part of No Zoning, a show he was organizing about artists taking advantage of Houston’s real estate anarchy.

After eighteen years as a Houston artist, the CAMH curator asked to exhibit, not my work, but my yard sale. Of course I agreed, but only if the CAMH installation was a real store, with everything for sale, cash-and-carry. Shopping is more fun than museum going. CAMH visitors’ eyes would light up as they read the “Yes, Everything is Really for Sale” signs. The signs themselves sold well! Every day I would drive a new truckload of old art to the CAMH. I completely emptied my storage.

Today, Bill’s Junk is still evolving. In this phase I find, buy, or make most things specifically for sale in the store, and host all sorts of art shows, pop-up shops, classes, and performances in the empty storefront next door.

Originally, Francesca and I bought the building at 1125 E 11th Street to meet some new needs: she needed taller walls for her paintings and we needed a second bathroom for our growing family. It had to be within commuting distance of Wilson Montessori Elementary and the Glassell School, both in



Montrose, where we drove several times a day.

A couple decades ago, buildings in the Heights or Montrose that might suit these needs were cheap, but in 2006, we had about given up. We were exploring our options over fish tacos at El Rey on Washington Avenue, when Jill Whitten and Rob Proctor happened by. They had just finished a similar search for workspace for their art conservation business (they ended up converting a convenience store at 13th Street and Studewood), and mentioned that the 11th Street building (which we had all looked at but which was already under contract) was again available. Some deal had fallen through.

Francesca and I barely finished our tacos. We hurried to 11th Street and called the agent, pacing the sidewalk until he came, and bought the building within an hour: Or rather, we bought a piece of land encumbered by a two-story “Dangerous Building,” a court-ordered designation that made it subject to a demolition by the Houston Police Department’s Office of Neighborhood Protection. The ground floor was hip deep in trash and rats, the roof had been partly burnt away by squatters’ campfires, and rain had rotted and collapsed part of the second floor, so you could see the sky through the holes. It was going to be great.

I’ll skip the details of the two-year renovation odyssey except to say that, like all historic rehab projects, it cost way more than we planned, and took much more time. We moved in three weeks before Hurricane Ike.

It has been great. We enjoy a mixed-use lifestyle common in many cities but unusual in Houston. We’re both close to our studios. The house upstairs is quirky, but comfortable. The storefronts have taken my artistic work in an unexpected new direction, and I think, after almost ten years here, we’re even going to get our money back!



Bill's Junk interiors and exteriors. Photos Tom Flaherty.

