

THE DOMESTIC GALLERY:

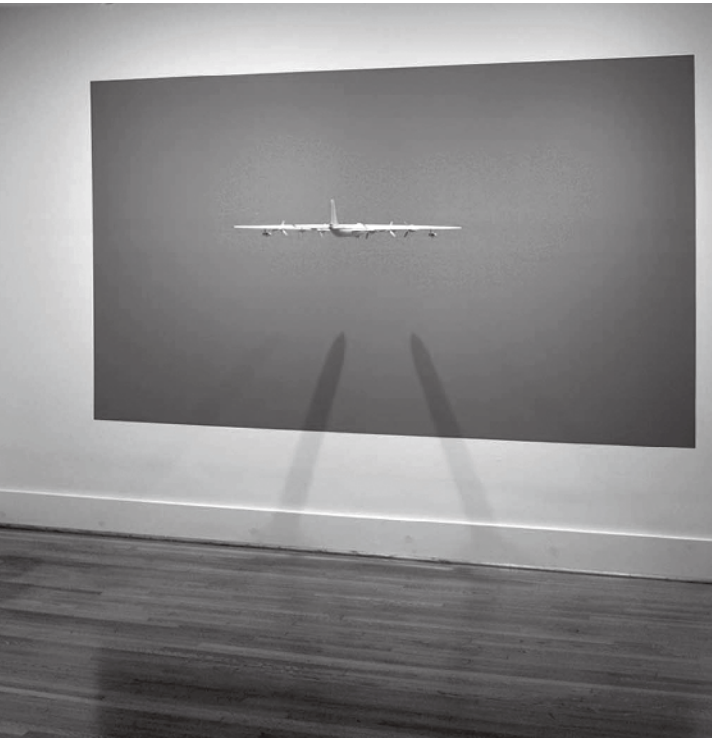


THREE VIGNETTES

by Falon Mihalic



From left: Russell Prince,
Martiny Ivy, and Lilly
Lerner exhibitions.
Courtesy Front Gallery



Historically, Houston artists create using the very fabric of the city itself. From transforming cars into works of art, to making artist-run collective spaces in unlikely buildings, to guerilla-style public art interventions, Houston is fertile ground for artists to experiment. And yet, even with a lack of zoning and a laissez-faire attitude towards development, the city deploys a variety of methods of control around artistic production such as event permits, liquor laws, and insurance requirements at the artist's expense. Additionally, the cost of attaining and maintaining an arts-related space like a studio, gallery, workshop, or event venue can be a major hindrance for open-ended emerging work. These constraints have made artists look to the home and the domestic realm as the stage for unfettered creative production and exhibition. What happens inside private living rooms is not typically within the purview of art, but Houston artists have changed that by taking advantage of their own residences as sites for cultural exchange.

Producing art shows and events within the home for public display performs two important functions that benefit both artists and the places where they occur. First, it embeds artistic practice into neighborhoods in a way that is highly localized and approachable for residents (as opposed to exhibits and performances that take place in museums, commercial galleries, and larger event venues). Second, it provides opportunities for emerging and underrepresented artists to experiment and show work with minimal overhead expense and risk. The experience of attending events inside people's homes is more intimate than a typical gallery opening because attendees can engage directly with the artists and other art-goers in conversation. These conversations help build arts patrons for emerging artists, which ultimately helps artists build their credibility and artistic practice. In this way, each home's space serves as an incubator where new ideas are developed and artists engage in an intimate presentation of their work. The living room as art space is a critical but lesser-known aspect of how creative placemaking happens in our neighborhoods. The results are open-ended, thought-provoking, at times awkward or strange, but always fun and approachable. Approachability matters when the goal is to bring out a diverse community.

Front Gallery

I park my bike in the front yard, just behind the white picket fence of the house at 1412 Bonnie Brae Street. It's hot but the neighbors and their kids are on the porch anyway. Inside the front door is a living room converted into a gallery space. There is a shelf that wraps around most of the room and holds a series of ceramic sculptures modeled after women's worn purses. The work is by local sculptor Lilly Lerner and each piece is based on the purse of a woman from her past. Each ceramic purse tells a story in the way that it sags with stretched seams and scratched metal buckles. They are rendered in such life-like detail that they appear to be real purses. One standout piece is of a tan leather satchel situated on top of the living room's fireplace. It is slumped in an imperfect stance, imbuing it with realistic texture and weight. Each bag tells a story that manifests itself well in the intimate space of the living room, as if the purse is waiting to be picked up and thrown over one's shoulder.

Front Gallery is run by artist Sharon Engelstein, who converts her living room into an art gallery every few months and invites her friends and neighbors to look at the work. All of the work is for sale, too. The events are promoted through social media and a mailing list, but the ambiance feels cozy and inviting, not elitist. I spend time looking at every sculpture and thinking about the life of the person who owned it. After about half an hour I am feeling crowded out as new people are coming into the space. The gallery is a standard Montrose bungalow living room in size and character with a window looking out onto the porch. The living room can fill quickly, making it its own self-regulating space. I step out onto the porch and fall into a laid back conversation with someone who lives down the street. Sharon jokes about how they installed the shelf just in time for the show. We listen and nod, happy to be a part of this gathering of people looking at sculpture together.

FLATS

It's Saturday night and the food truck out front signals that a party is happening in an apartment complex in the East End. Upstairs, the one-bedroom apartment of artist and photographer Ronald Llewelyn Jones has been converted into a temporary art gallery for three local photographers. The show is part of the pop-up photography exhibition series FLATS presented by curator Jessi Bowman. FLATS transforms living rooms and apartments into one-night exhibition spaces and invites the public to view the work. This show is titled "Perceptions: Women" and includes the work of three Houston artists exploring the theme of women photographing women. Some of the works are portraiture style, others have staged and stylized settings with women ironing, gardening, or hanging laundry to dry. Each artist's work is grouped into a section of the apartment. Roller derby women are profiled in black and white in a series in the kitchen and the living room contains photographs and sculptural installations of women's clothing.

To light the show, there are metal clamp lamps hung in strategic corners of the apartment and directed at the work on the walls. The furniture has all been moved into a back room that's locked during the show. The apartment dweller, Ronald, is glad to provide the physical space to emerging artists by giving over his apartment to the show.

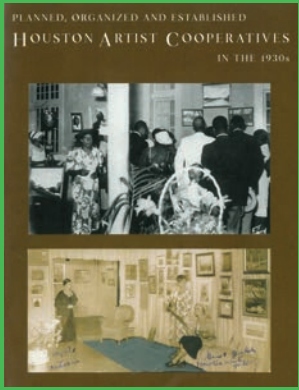
One photograph jumps out at me: a woman bent over an ironing board and ironing her dress while she is wearing it. The colors are subdued tans and greys but the dress and the pile of clothes in the laundry basket on the floor are a pale sickly pink. It is by Elise Weber, a photographer pursuing an MFA degree at the University of Houston. Participating in the FLATS series has taken her work outside of the university setting and inserted it into a local community context.

Ronald and I sit outside in folding chairs and talk over the noise of the food truck generator. He is pleased with the turnout and the event overall. We talk about the screen printing workshop he will host soon, also in his apartment. His private residence becomes a site of cultural exchange, a kind of palimpsest where the program of the living room dissolves into a classroom-gallery hybrid, and a site that also expresses pride as a reflection of the neighborhood.



Alex Marinick installation.
Courtesy FLATS.





Planned, Organized and Established: Houston Artist Cooperatives

The use of residences as arts spaces has a long history in Houston. The Orange Show, the Artery, the Living Room Art series of Voices Breaking Boundaries, Inversion, and, of course, Project Row Houses are among the many, many “living rooms as art” that shaped the cultural landscape here. An exhibition in fall 2017 at the Houston Public Library, curated by Danielle Burns Wilson, takes the history back to the 1930s with the establishment of the Houston Artists Gallery in the Beaconsfield Apartment Building basement. The segregation of Houston extended to the art world and Blacks established the Negro Art Guild in a parallel effort holding their exhibitions at the Colored Carnegie Library. The exhibition at the Julia Ideson Building brought works from the two collectives together in the same place for the first time including “My Guitar” by Samuel Countee, who attended Houston’s Booker T. Washington High School and went on to gain national recognition.

Alabama Song

I walk up the curved concrete walkway leading to a brick 1930s house in the Third Ward. The front door is heavy and made of wood with an ornate metal handle. I cross the threshold into a living room of ordinary size where there are two dozen people sitting in chairs with others on the floor. There are several musical acts performing at this experimental show called “Lean, Bleak.” Each group is set up in a different area: the sun room, living room, and dining room based on the acoustic needs of each musical act. The audience rearranges chairs and sprawls in new positions on the floor in each new room to listen. Some people have their eyes closed and there is sound coming from the adjacent sun room with its French doors flung open.

The sound is reverberating off the mosaic tile floor and into the living room. It is minimal and ethereal then picks up tempo and complexity and I find myself listening intently for where the music will go next. I settle into my chair so I can revel in this rare opportunity to simply listen with intense focus. The music feels unscripted, raw, and somewhat surreal as the performers create sounds in response to each other. The space feels inviting and approachable in spite of the work being sometimes emotional and intense. The walls of the living room are intentionally left grey and textured, a contrast from the smooth pure white walls of a typical contemporary gallery space. These walls seem to say, “It’s ok, you and your work are welcome here.”

That welcoming attitude is important to Regina Agu and Gabriel Martinez, co-directors of Alabama Song. They focus on new, emerging, and experimental practices across multiple arts disciplines. They want artists to feel comfortable creating new work in the space. At “Lean, Bleak,” most of the audience is immersed in every strange sound, sitting with eyes closed on the edge of their seats. These emotional performances are punctuated by complimentary remarks from the hosts which brought the space back to feeling like we were all just hanging out in someone’s living room. The apex of emotional intensity happens when one of the vocalists sits in a chair with his back to the audience and produces beautiful primal sounds, ranging from guttural coughs to long high-pitched free-falls of sound.

These events are organized, hosted, and produced by artists within the control and safety of their private residences. One major benefit of the home approach is that financial expenses are minimized while community connections and artist ideas are elevated. Home-based artist spaces are a grassroots form of cultural capital where artists are lifting up the work of their peers. These spaces are the fertile ground for seeds of artistic ideas to germinate. They are the incubation chambers for helping emerging artists grow into themselves and their work. In these ways, the home-based art venue fits into the larger ecosystem of artistic production in the city as a springboard. New ideas are risky and the domestic gallery provides a platform for a test launch to present the work in a low key setting before sharing it with a larger audience. The term “emerging” can apply to artists of many types; they may be still in art school, new to practicing art in a specific medium, or even new to art-making all together. It is notable that each of these spaces featured are run entirely by artists. The host artists are elevating the work being produced and helping to catapult it into the community.

These art events work well inside the home as an outstretch of our culture of being a welcoming city—perhaps it is a kind of relic of southern hospitality. The living room art spaces build on a history of innovative art spaces such as the Orange Show, Voice Breaking Boundaries Living Room Art, the Artery, and Project Row Houses that have been a strong part of Houston’s identity. They have transpired as the result of the same forces: collaged land use, affordability, lax zoning, and a deep need for emerging artists and new ideas to germinate in a place-specific context. Domestic art spaces are a small-scale testing ground for what may evolve into longer term or larger-scale artistic institutions or events. In these home-based art spaces, an important type of storytelling occurs that’s intimate and personal where the goal is a kind of focused exchange of ideas, expressions, and actions. The smaller audience size puts greater responsibility on the viewer to engage with the work; to become an active participant. The act of telling stories, whether through sculpture, photography, or experimental music creates a shared identity that reflects the character of the place where it is made. Using the home as site for cultural exchange normalizes artistic practice and makes it an accessible part of everyday neighborhood life.



Photo courtesy
Alabama Song.