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Arty Party opens Texas Biennial

April 19th, 2011 – SARAH FISCH

I don't think I've ever had an interesting conversation that began with the other person saying, "When I was at Burning Man..."

I'm not saying it couldn't happen. And I've got several friends who've had fun during this increasingly famous free-form, if expensive, festival thingy; one friend met her husband at Burning Man. He's a nudist who calls himself "Nantucket,"* and who works in insurance.

Also, I've never been, so what do I know?

But when somebody starts a monologue with that declaration, I brace myself but-quick. What follows is often a too-long, free-form description of — depending on who's cornered you — a hallucinogenic vision quest that just doesn't lend itself to snappy anecdote ("and the Universe was looking at me... and it was then I knew I should express myself with fractal art in my IT office"), or a sappy, utopian, neo-tribal meta-culture, back-to-Rousseau, everything-by-barter type treatise (which always flummoxes me, as the Burning Man milieu seems to me to be upper-middle-class white people who can afford to rent equipment and purchase drugs and take a week off in Nevada, not a sustained experiment in radical social policy), or it ends "I saw naked chicks making out and stuff," or similar. I even prefer *Wicker Man* (the original, NOT this one) to Burning Man.

Why do I bring this up?

Mainly, it's because I've given too much thought to this Burning Man phenomenon not to write about it. Writing about this somehow justifies all the time I've wasted haterating in this dancery. But also, I'll be bringing this up again later in the post.

So.

I drove up to Austin and attended the Texas Biennial Opening Party at Arthouse at the Jones Center this past Saturday night. I also took a look at some of its current exhibitions (I might review 'em).



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Arthouse. I took this photo, and it's not so great, I know.

It was really a lovely party. Arthouse is a beautiful piece of architecture, and in addition to copious and inviting gallery space, it has two rooftop decks with spectacular views of the city. There was a beer and wine bar, and a whole lot of networking going on. I saw some truly wonderful hairdos and shoes, and had upwards of a dozen interesting conversations. Writers, artists, gallerists and academics had come from all over the state. I met up with an excited crew of San Antonians, mostly younger artmakers who gave me their take on the Biennial work they'd seen that day and gave me some ideas of what I'd like to see through May.

Adriana Barrios and her partner Barbara Justice, who run the tiny but mighty Justice Works Studio out of their home on the Blue Star premises, had just driven up from the King William Parade (which, for you non-San Antonians, is a highly eccentric parade within the free yearly Fiesta King William Fair, wherein folks play music, act up, and wave from ad hoc floats dressed like...well, awesomely, to wit):



Not at Burning Man. She is "Miss San Antonio," dammit. Photo by John Fisch

Korean-born UTSA student turned San Antoniana [Jung Hee Mun](#), a painter, printmaker and installation and performance artist, told me about her opening at [Sala Diaz](#) the night before. Filmmaking duo/married couple (and *Glasstire* video contributors) [Angela and Mark Walley](#) made the scene and sized up the bar. I congratulated San Antonio artist [Esteban Delgado](#), geometric painter and an excited Texas Biennial first-timer. And [Blue Star Contemporary Art Center](#) Community Outreach person [Emily Barker](#) introduced me to a non-San Antonian; [Piotr](#) (pronounced "Peter") [Chizinski](#), a rangy, multi-pierced Cornell grad student originally from Connecticut, but who collaborates with Dallas-based [Ryder Richards](#) and [Jonathan Whitfill](#) of Lubbock, both studio artists and high school teachers, in a collective called [Ryder Jon Piotrs](#), a "Jaws-of-Life for the three car pile-up of stalled inspirational pursuits," according to their [website](#).

Ryder Jon Piotrs operates the "RJP Nomadic Gallery," described by their website as "a 24 foot Ryder truck rented and then converted into a sophisticated white-walled gallery space," which the trio can set up and fill with works of art, based on a finely honed system of DIY engineered pre-fab parts which they ship to the event location and which often serve two purposes; packing pallets, for example, fold out into a staircase allowing viewers to climb into the truck/gallery. Ryder Jon Piotrs can set up a moving exhibition in a matter of days, and converge on specific projects from their home bases. RJP often exhibits the Nomadic Gallery with the cooperation and funding of schools and other educational outreach organizations.



RJP Nomadic Gallery at Strake Jesuit School in Houston, 2007, courtesy of [Ryder Jon Piotrs's website](#)

The next installment (haw) might just be at [Blue Star](#); I'd love to see it happen, and [Barker](#), thinking aloud, brainstormed how it might fit in with [Blue Star's](#) educational programming. Neat.

At this point, I espied [Margarita Cabrera](#) across the deck, where a string quartet was setting up. I first came across her work at [Artpace](#) in 2008, though it wasn't in person. At that time, I was living in New York and occasionally did freelance research and writing for [Artpace](#) — I did some translation work for [Margarita Cabrera's](#) "The Craft of Resistance" installation; there were bilingual instruction printouts explaining *maquiladora* handiwork. In checking and re-checking my work, one online translating tool transmogrified her name from Spanish into English as "Daisy Goatherd," which sent me into hysterics.

Then, at the incendiary [Rita Gonzalez](#)-curated *Phantom Sightings* show at the [Museo Alameda](#) two years ago, I was blown away by her life-scale, [Claes Oldenburg](#)-ian soft sculptures, including "Vocho (yellow)." Her "Tractor de la Vida," part of the [McNay Art Museum's](#) *New Image Sculpture* show, continues her examination of the often-grueling labor of Mexicans and Mexican immigrants as worthy of reification, and the absurdity of its being taken for granted, or discounted absolutely, by immigration-fearing *Norteamericanos*.

However! In addition to telling her how much I respect her work, I really, really wanted to tell Margarita Cabrera the "Daisy Goatherd" thing. I'm sure she already knows – she's probably sick of it, and nobody with the last name of "Fisch" (pronounced "fish") should throw stones – but still. It gave me an opening. I lost her in the crowd, though.

Disappointed, I headed up to the small, uppermost deck of Arthouse, and took in the view.

"Have you seen the moon?" said a man's voice, stonerish and perky to the point of avid.

I looked at the moon, nearly full. Then I turned towards him: Friendly-faced, 50ish, Anglo, grinning pleasantly, with thinning hair coaxed into a wee pigtail, and wearing a tropical shirt, he represented a sort of last-gasp Boomer archetype of an Austinite. I harassed myself for jumping to conclusions. Then I looked down at his feet. Birkenstocks. Shit.

I said, "It's pretty."

"Have you seen the reflection of that building," he said, pointing to one building and chuckling breathlessly, then pointing to another, "on THAT building?"

I looked where he was pointing, where white- columned windows hung like ghosts in an office tower's flat glass front.

"Sort of gothic," I offered.

"More like, like a comic book, where it's the enemy of the hero and that's,uh, his lair, in there."

He was pretty drunk.

"OK," I said.

The guy gazed across Congress at the [Paramount Theater](#), which was, according to its marquee, screening the classic Western *Rio Bravo*, starring Angie Dickinson, and sponsored by Turner Classic Movies.

"Hey!" the guy cried. "WHO WANTS TO GO ACROSS THE STREET AND FUCK ANGIE DICKINSON?!"

The guy guffawed. The conversation amongst the maybe 10-15 guests on the deck ceased for a moment. I made sympathetic eye contact with a spectacled gentleman about this guy's age. The gentleman half-smiled at me. He wore tortoiseshell glasses frames and a big Gerbera daisy stuck in the topmost buttonhole of his crisp, pink-striped Oxford cloth shirt. His smile encouraged me to say something.

"I don't think she's actually in there," I said, adding, "and I love her, but I'm not really into ladies..."

I paused, and wondered why on Earth I felt I had to explain the various reasons I didn't want to or could not fuck Angie Dickinson across the street or anywhere. I felt suddenly guilty, as though I'd insulted Angie Dickinson. I made an ass of myself during another conversation that night too, when somebody told me that they had "a little bit of [the late, great Congresswoman] [Barbara Jordan](#)" near where they worked. They meant a statue, but for an agonizing moment, I assumed that this person's workplace was in possession of Congresswoman Jordan's cremains. Like, a tiny little urn. But I digress.





Luckily, Ms. Dickinson didn't actually hear this. Photo taken from listal.com.

"I don't care what you're into," the guy insisted, suddenly indignant, "when you see her in that dance number, man, shakin' it in *Viva Las Vegas*—"

The spectacled gentleman and I protested, as one: "That was Ann Margret!"

"Oh," the guy said, a little deflated. "Yeah, you're right. Ann Margret, yeah."

Then he brightened. "Sorry I tried to pass off Ann Margret as Angie Dickinson. I trip A LOT. One time, at Burning Man..."

I reflected on how irritating I sometimes find Austinites, and totally blamed it on this guy, who didn't mean any harm (except possibly to Ms Dickinson, depending on what he's into), and didn't really represent anybody but himself. I didn't listen to a thing he said, though.

After a short time and mid-sentence, possibly, the guy wandered away. I then engaged in a fantastic chat with the spectacled, Gerbera Daisy-festooned person, a witty and charming man with a beautiful drawl and lovely manners. I'll call him Scott instead of his real name, because he asked me *not to talk about him*.

This is the first time that's ever happened to me as an arts writer, other than when the subject is dishing dirt of some kind, and wants to be off-record for fear of losing his or her job. But that's not the case with Scott at all: He's got a satisfying if not glamorous public job in the arts, and once gave a non-dishy interview to a [lifestyle magazine](#), but about which he felt dubious later. It's easier for him to help artists, he said, if he keeps a low profile. He shrugged, and smiled.

But he gave me permission to tell you the following story.

It seems that Scott has a number of advanced degrees. I asked him which degree was his favorite one, and he answered in elaborate-sounding, pitch-perfect German, with balletic hand gestures, a little dramatic performance. I don't know German, but I was impressed.

I said, "Do you ever get to use German in Austin?"

"Well," he sighed, "just recently, the ambassador from Austria visited."

"Really!?" I gasped. "What was he like? What did he say about Texas?"

Scott smiled, with sad eyes. "I have no idea," he confessed. "I was so busy working on installing an artwork, I never got to meet him."

I felt awful. There's Scott with his favorite degree, in possession of his fluid, secret and adored German, and he just so barely missed using it on a visiting diplomat – the very ambassador of Austria, no less. I hoped that he'd gotten over this loss, and had become philosophical about it.

"When did this happen to you?" I asked.

"Wednesday," he said.

I wanted to cry. I reflected on how lovely Austinites can be.

*Name changed to protect myself from possible ire of said nudist/ insurance analyst.

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One response to "Arty Party opens Texas Biennial"

1. Steve Peralta

[April 20, 2011 at 10:58 am](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Reply](#)

Read the whole piece and thought: "That's awesome."

Then I scrolled up and saw "Sarah Fisch" and thought: "That's awesome."

Hope you're well, Sarah!

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