

Home is where the art is for these Houston collectors

By Molly Glentzer | April 4, 2017 | Updated: April 6, 2017 3:37pm



Photo: Steve Gonzales, Staff

Aaron Parazette and Sharon Engelstein operate Front Gallery in their Montrose home

Some people prefer to leave work at work.

Those people likely are not artists.

Especially not artists as passionate about their field as two Houston couples who use their homes to promote the work of others.

Sculptor Sharon Engelstein and painter Aaron Parazette - a longtime art scene power couple - opened Front Gallery five years ago because they

had underused space at the front of their home in the Castle Court neighborhood.

"It was like a well-appointed, climate-controlled New York apartment that our dog slept in," Parazette said. "It was kind of criminal to be air conditioning (the space) and not using it."

Mixed-media artist Debra Barrera and art conservator Jonathan Hopson, who married in 2014, had almost the opposite situation last year: They wanted to establish a gallery, but bought a place they also could live in because buying a commercial space wasn't feasible.

"It was a bit of an existential crisis," Hopson said. "It's light years easier to buy a house."

He and Barrera fell in love not just with the Arts and Crafts architecture of their circa- 1914 home in the Audubon Place Historic District, but with the potential of playing contemporary art against those bones. "It was important to maintain the integrity of the space and not make it a cube," Barrera said.

They already had done a cube: Hopson's previous Hello Project was in a back room at McMurtrey Gallery, which Barrera directed; it closed in late 2015 when dealer Ronnie McMurtrey retired.

After working eight hours daily for three months last year to revive their 1,700-square-foot bungalow, which could easily have been a tear-down, Hopson and Barrera opened Jonathan Hopson Gallery in September.

To date, they've mounted a group show, a solo show by Houston artist Emily Peacock, a first Houston show by French artist Annabelle Arlie and a photography show featuring Menil curator Toby Kamps and Taka Nonaka-Hill from Los Angeles.

They're contributing to a small but lively history of Houston house galleries.

Engelstein fondly remembers JeffElrod's Art of This Century from the mid-1990s and Mark Allen's Revolution Summer and LAX of the late 1990s, which were intentionally temporary. More recently, Sasha Dela ran a house gallery called Skydive. Among the current bunch are the elaborate Cherryhurst House (which has dinners and space for a resident artist), Cassandra Thibodeaux's film venue 14 Pews and Gabriel Martinez's salonlike Alabama Song.

While some house galleries go the nonprofit route, Front Gallery and Jonathan Hopson Gallery operate more like low-key commercial spaces. "Our goal is to put a little money in the artists' pockets," Engelstein said of Front Gallery.

She also considers the curatorial work part of her own artistic practice.

Engelstein founded her first artist-run "space" about 23 years ago. Named for its extremely demure size, Gallery One Three Seven had two walls that stood about 6.5 inches tall, and a floor covering 1.37 square feet. It sat atop a pedestal under a single light.

People took it seriously - "that's a nice thing about Houston," Engelstein said. But Gallery One Three Seven had a short run of just four or five shows.

Front Gallery, with its four real walls, is a lot more work.

"A few times, as we've been planning and executing shows, I've been like, ugh, why are we doing this?" Engelstein said. "Then the art community comes to the openings and it becomes very clear. It's been very meaningful."

She and Parazette often introduce mature talent from their wide, international network to Houston, but they also champion local artists they've discovered.

They realized they had a unique folk artist in their elderly neighbor Bob Ivy, for example. In February, they gave veteran ceramicist Lilly Lerner her first show, and in March they introduced Martin Ivy, Bob's son. Last year they gave new star JooYoung Choi her first show, although they claim no credit for her meteoric rise.

"She was blowing by us, and we grabbed her for a moment," Parazette said.

Front Gallery recently took a six-month hiatus so Parazette and Engelstein could prepare for their own exhibitions in Dallas and Los Angeles, respectively.

"If you're renting a space on Main Street, you can't do that," Parazette said.

Across Montrose, Barrera also is juggling her own work. She has a show up this month at Moody Gallery. And Hopson has another job managing a private art collection.

"If we made a living doing this, it would be super great - wonderful - but really, what this is about is having a passion for contemporary art and being able to provide an opportunity for these artists to have exhibitions," he said. "We do it because we love it, and we hope people appreciate it."

During their Sunday afternoon openings, guests tend to linger on the porch. A hundred people might come and go during the four-hour event.

"We didn't want what we had before, when openings were like date-night parties," Hopson said. "This is leisurely ... and there's a level people have to get past. It's easy to walk up to a commercial space, but you really have to want to be here to get here."

Engelstein and Parazette have noticed that, too. "A standard gallery space is wonderful, but you feel like you're in someone's business space," Parazette said. House galleries have a warm, welcoming atmosphere by nature. "It becomes a comfortable discussion space," he said.

Barrera and Hopson already are thinking about extending their gallery onto the front porch. But they also savor the days when their house is really just a home.

"It's super-interesting to be here with the work," Barrera said. "We get out of our bedroom and go to the kitchen and get to walk around the work, see it every day."



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