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The Art Guys attempt to sell themselves

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Michael Galbreth, left, and Jack Massing are auctioning off their remains.
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Now a lucky collector can purchase the Art Guys," proclaims the creepy/funny brochure for *Forever Yours*, Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth's latest project. "Not just their work, but the actual artists!"

Jack and Mike, art partners for 25 years, are auctioning off their cremated remains. The high bidder will take home realistic bronze busts of the pair, designed to hold their ashes, and all the documents the project generates — including a real, suitable-for-display legal contract that, after each Guy's death, gives the buyer ownership of the artist's earthly remains.

The auction ends April 1, but it's not a hoax. "We always do what we say we're going to do," says Mike. "That's what gives our work the power."

The minimum bid is \$1 million. You bid not through a gallery or auction house but directly to the Art Guys themselves — via their Web site (www.theartguys.com), or by phone, or in person.

If you can't wait until April 1, or if you're afraid the auction could push the price into the stratosphere, the Web site offers another option: an eBay-like "Buy It Now" price of \$2.1 million.

"It's a joke," says Jack, "but it's a serious joke."

In the Art Guys' office, among books showing their performances, sculptures and drawings, Jack and Mike say they think *Forever Yours* is

one of their most important works to date.

At midcareer, the Art Guys can point to works in a half-dozen museums' permanent collections. Previous antics, such as their *Suits* project, have been covered by CNN, the New York Times and the New Yorker, not to mention *Art in America* and *ArtNews*. And Jack and Mike attract fans with cachet: This year, as part of the Art Guys' 25th anniversary "Silver Jubilee," they'll release a tribute album to themselves, with songs by Joe "King" Carrasco, Daniel Johnston and Terry Allen.

Mike and Jack relish the idea that *Forever Yours* could end up in "News of the Weird." But, they note, it's also full of ideas for the art world to chew on.

Reliquaries and preserved bits of saints bodies have been around for millennia, Mike notes, but those weren't left consciously by the bodies' owners. (The saints were generally busy being martyred.) In putting their own bodies on the line, Jack and Mike more closely resemble one of their heroes, performance artist Chris Burden. For his most famous piece, *Shoot*, Burden had an assistant fire a loaded rifle into his left arm.

In 1971, the art world concerned itself — like, wow, man — with experiences. Decades later, it seems drunk on money and fame, and it's easy to read *Forever Yours* as a sly commentary on those obsessions. The Guys note that collectors proudly refer to "my Picasso" or "my Julie Mehretu" as if they own not a piece of work but a piece of the artist. Being able to drop a famous name shows you can afford the best.

So what's an artist worth? Or, more to the point, what are the Art Guys worth? Several of their public-art projects have cost more than \$300,000. The *Suits* project — now owned by Museum of Fine Arts Houston, and the subject of a book — brought in more than \$400,000. Jack and Mike argue that *Forever Yours* would be a bargain at \$1 million.

"It's not just for any collector," laughs gallery owner Betty Moody. "But there are always the Lester Markses of this world: great collectors who love quirky things. Somebody is bound to buy it."

In the national art market, \$1 million isn't a big deal anymore. Yes, back in 2004 it was possible for a collector to astonish the world by

paying \$8 million for *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, a shark that Damien Hirst had floated in a glass tank of formaldehyde. The shark, observers noted, wasn't even in good shape. Rotting, it had to be replaced.

This year, another Hirst work dwarfed *Impossibility's* price. A consortium reportedly bought *For the Love of God*, a diamond-encrusted skull, for almost \$100 million — the highest price ever paid for a work by a living artist. (Detractors note that Hirst holds almost a quarter interest in the consortium and that he may have been driving up his own price.)

Death, art and money: *Forever Yours* wraps those subjects in a package even more shocking than Hirst's. And the Art Guys, unlike Hirst's shark, would at least be shelf-stable.

A day after visiting the Art Guys' studio, I heard something that made me feel differently about *Forever Yours*. Last spring — 25 days after e-mailing the first *Forever Yours* announcement — Mike was diagnosed with cancer. The lymphoepithelioma in his tonsils was alarmingly near his lymph nodes. During aggressive chemotherapy, he lost nearly 50 pounds. Last summer, after one treatment caused his body to stop producing red and white blood cells, he was hospitalized.

When I called, Mike said that he hadn't mentioned the cancer because it didn't seem relevant to *Forever Yours*. He's fine now, he says. As far as doctors can tell, the malignancy is gone.

But it's only in the last few weeks that he's felt well enough to work full time again. That's put him and Jack significantly behind their schedule for marketing *Forever Yours* to collectors — and marketing, of course, is much of what the project is about. "I was trying to stay alive," Mike explains. "It's hard to get work done if you're dead."

But in almost the same breath, he says that he didn't really think he was going to die. "I never gave it any thought," he says. "I was way too young, way too healthy. And I had really good doctors."

The physical impossibility of death, you think, in the mind of someone living. Mike can get his head around *Forever Yours* — but not if forever starts soon.

A week after Mike's diagnosis, another major life event blindsided his wife. "OK," Rainey Knudson thought to herself. "Pregnancy. Right."

Mike's cancer, Rainey jokes, was a great distraction from her first trimester. Chemo trumps morning sickness.

Even before Mike got sick, Rainey disliked *Forever Yours*. It's not that she doesn't appreciate art. She is, in fact, the founding editor of glasstire.com, a sprightly Web site about Texas visual art. But it's one thing for an artist to propose selling his earthly remains to the highest bidder, and it's another thing for your husband to do it.

Think of the money, Mike told her. Wouldn't you rather have a convertible than have my ashes sitting on your mantel?

She tried to negotiate. *Can I keep some of your ashes?* she asked. *A Zip-Loc baggie's worth? Snack-size?*

But he held firm. A concept is a concept.

To Rainey, at least, Mike's chemo made *Forever Yours* seem real. "There's nothing like cancer," she says, "to get you in touch with mortality."

And there's nothing like a baby to get you in touch with life. Tennessee Samuel Galbreth is a month old, and Rainey and Mike are predictably smitten.

Rainey doesn't waste energy objecting to *Forever Yours* anymore. She knows it sounds ridiculous but she says she was helped by a scene from *Meet the Fockers*. Encountering cremains spilled in a fireplace, a cat uses them as a litter box.

That could be Michael's ashes spilled in a collector's fireplace, Rainey thought. Would it make any difference if a cat peed on him?

Not really, she decided. It's not the ashes that matter.

Mike is hers for now. And when the time comes, she'll deliver whatever's left to the highest bidder.

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