

The Art Guys

TO THE OUTER LOOP AND BEYOND

- Kelly Klaasmeyer -
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Perhaps you witnessed the performance of *Three Day Stubble* or saw an exhibition of work by Don Ed Hardy, founder of *Tattoo Times* magazine. Maybe you attended a fundraiser to produce a catalogue of the late Lucas Johnson's work, which featured a performance by an octogenarian sword swallower and his lovely, nubile, septuagenarian assistant. All these events took place at The Art Guys' studio. If you don't remember attending any of them, it doesn't necessarily mean you weren't there—those are the kinds of parties they tend to throw.

Since 1989, The Art Guys' studio has been located in a late-nineteenth-century warehouse on 22nd Street in downtown Houston. The building began life as a mattress factory but achieved true greatness as the studio of Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, a.k.a. The Art Guys. It also serves as the "The Art Guys World Headquarters Art Center" which, as touted on the duo's website, presents "exhibitions, performances, concerts, events, weddings, parties and shenanigans."

But next year, The Art Guys will leave behind their beloved mattress factory for—gasp—the outer loop! (Non-Houstonians are forgiven for not grasping the full import of this decision.) In a quest for equity, these longtime Heights renters will be building a compound on a two-acre site located just north of 610. The studio will be combined with the home of Mike Galbreth and his wife Rainey Knudson, Founder and Executive Director of the online visual arts journal *Glasstire*.

They will miss the old studio, and so will a helluva lot of other people, but the Guys are too busy to grieve. On April 1, they debuted the yearlong performance *Height Like Mike* at their World Headquarters. For the period of one year, Jack will don specially made platform cowboy boots that elevate him 5.25 inches from a mere 5' 10.625" to match Mike's statuesque height of 6' 3.875". Until April 1, 2005, Jack will wear his elevator shit-kickers anytime both he and Mike appear in public. Recently,

running into the pair at art openings is really disconcerting.

When Jack's not teetering on his stiltlike cowboy boots, most of their time is filled with epic public art projects—something The Art Guys seem to have an unusually high tolerance for. *Video Ring*, recently completed for the George Bush Intercontinental Airport, is a video and sound installation using eighty monitors set into an ellipse in the Terminal E's ceiling. A series of abstracted images of Houston move around the ellipse, somehow controlled by four synchronizers.

After finishing a public art project of such magnitude, most artists hide in their studios, curled up on the floor in the fetal position whimpering “no more meetings...no more meetings.” But The Art Guys are doing another airport project at George Bush Intercontinental, in the Federal Inspection Services Building. Punningly entitled *Travel Light*, the project consists of three hundred and sixty cast fiberglass suitcases that glow and pulse with computer controlled light. And, in their free time, the Guys are working on an aluminum wall sculpture for Phoenix's Sky Harbor International Airport. From initial project renderings, it looks like it will include silhouettes of Bozo and a wind-up toy car, but it's still early in the game and I bet there are still a lot of meetings ahead.

I caught up with The Art Guys over the Internet for a “virtual” studio visit, 'cause I myself just moved outside the loop (wince) and 22nd street is now a couple days journey away. They were preparing to head to Marfa for Reality Television at The Marfa Book Company, which opens during the ever jam-packed Chinati Open House weekend. Reality Television substitutes choice sections of “reality” with video. It includes works like *It's Better To Turn On The TV Than To Curse The Darkness* (video candles) (2003), in which a tiny video screen mounted on a candle stick plays footage of a flame. In the Marfa show, they present one of their favorites from the series—a piece featuring a paint-by-number Mary and Jesus. The faces have been neatly cut out and replaced with video portraits of Jack and Mike. Jack—apparently the more hirsute of the two—had originally grown a beard to be Jesus, but they decided it would be funnier if he played Mary.

I e-mailed The Art Guys a list of questions that they returned with suitably Art Guy-esque responses.

Kelly Klaasmeyer What are you wearing?

Mike Galbreth Just some peanut butter behind the ears.

Jack Massing Sneakers, socks, jeans, whitey tighties, “Bayou Preservation” t-shirt, bow tie, ankle brace, cufflinks, scarf, top hat, wool gloves, ear muffs, vest, rain coat, lipstick, some rouge, reading glasses, diamond nose stud, smile.

KK What are you making?

The Art Guys Trouble.

KK I understand you (art) guys are building a new studio. What’s it going to look like? Will it be suitably luxurious for international art stars such as yourselves? What is your opinion on the gilding of bathroom fixtures?

The Art Guys Yes, we are—The Taj Mahal, yes. We do not like gilded bathroom fixtures. We hire young virgins to bring us spring water from West Texas.

KK Will the new place be air-conditioned, or do you think that sweating builds character?

The Art Guys Like our old studio, we will have AC in the office and drawing room. No sweat.

KK Will you employ teams of minions in the new studio?

The Art Guys Just for the water.

KK What was the best party you ever had at your studio and who posted bail?

The Art Guys That’s a tough one. Too tough. Vote Kerry/Edwards.

KK Are those boots Jack is wearing for *Height Like Mike* comfortable? They look like they need a warning label.

JM Quite comfy. However, they tend to hurt after five hours...like most shoes, I guess. The air is a bit thinner, and I enjoy looking down on others. Now I know why Mike is so great.

KK Do you play Lotto?

The Art Guys Sometimes. We have yet to win. You cannot win unless you buy a ticket. Your chances of winning are very slim after you buy one. Someone wins. The others do not really lose; they help pay for education, right?

What the hell is that thing on the floor?

Never mind.

KK You have recently been doing projects in the easygoing, big-money-for-little-effort, fun-filled and bureaucracy-free world of public art. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

The Art Guys No comment yet.

KK What do you think is the worst piece of art you ever made? What was the best?

The Art Guys That little ugly one we tossed out a few years back. All the rest were the best. That question is like asking a mother which child she likes the best. They are all our children. Every day we embrace them, tell them we love them, and...what was the question?

KK Do you have a favorite Art Guys project that has yet to be realized because of financial, technical, gravitational or moral constraints?

The Art Guys The 700-square-mile smiley face on the moon—easily visible from Earth but one hell of a budget. We may get to do it if we win one dozen big lotteries.

KK Have you ever thought a performance was too embarrassing to do? What was the most difficult performance?

The Art Guys No. “Bulk Up For The CAM,” but it was also one of the most fun things that we did in our lives.

KK If you could change one thing about Houston, what would it be?

The Art Guys The mountains.

KK Do you think the world would be a better place if George H. W. Bush had been sterilized?

The Art Guys We read that he was! We are shocked. No use crying over spilt...milk.

KK Um, I have to hit 1,500 words to get the full fee from ARTL!ES. I’ve got some credit card minimum payments to make...could you fill up some more space? Maybe give your upcoming schedule, a list of favorite foods, cut and paste some bad poetry? Any little bit helps...

The Art Guys The Art Guys are artists whose work is a mediumistic exercise in psychic expansiveness, taking form through a multiplicity of voices. All of their works, artistic or theoretical, are either demonstrations of the irreducibility of the other, or else, they are examples of how sensible worlds are constructed based on distortion. This refoundation of the psyche, made with infinitely codified fragments and assimilated images, constitutes a political critique of all the theories elucidated in the West that lead to the death of the subject, while at the same time, it reaffirms the validity of cultures where memory is essential. Their archeological inventories point out how a symbolic creature dwells in “the other’s” terrain as it builds its own emblematic world—its own monad.

KK Beautiful, thanks! I was so hoping we could fit the word “monad” somewhere into the interview.