

# Texas Monthly

## the tree of strife

by  
MIMI  
SWARTZ

For a quarter of a century, the Art Guys, Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing, have been Houston's master provocateurs, stirring up discussion with their wacky, thoughtful, and tenaciously marketed "social sculptures." But have they finally gone too far?



## The Tree of Strife

When the Art Guys, Houston's zany performance art duo, staged a faux wedding to a live oak in 2009, they thought they were raising questions about man and nature. But before long, *The Art Guys Marry a Plant* had become a flashpoint for the fight over gay marriage, inspiring vitriolic outbursts, pitting friend against friend, and causing at least one dramatic emotional breakdown. Was this the provocative artists' greatest public failure? Or was it the most successful work of art they'd ever created?

by Mimi Swartz  
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The top half of the spouse, which the Art Guys moved to their studio after the tree was vandalized in December.  
Photo by Leann Mueller

**AT THE BEGINNING OF WHAT WAS TO BE AN UNSPARING** summer in more ways than one, two middle-aged men prepared for their June wedding. The year was 2009. Months earlier, they had sent out invitations, and they'd scheduled a wedding announcement in the newspaper. Now they put on tuxedos and walked down the aisle in front of friends and family inside the sculpture garden of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, with works by Alexander Calder and Henri Matisse looking on.

What a casual observer might think was out of the ordinary—that these two men were marrying each other—was, in fact, not what was out of the ordinary. That became obvious when the grooms started pulling a squeaky-wheeled wagon behind them, upon which bobbed a potted live oak sapling. They parked themselves before a florid-faced minister, recited vows to honor and protect the tree, and then married it, putting a ring on one of its taller branches. Afterward, the crowd decamped across the street to the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where everyone ate wedding cake—except, of course, the tree.

If you happened to be familiar with Houston's art scene, this event might not have seemed so strange. The faux wedding, in fact, was just another presentation by the Art Guys, two popular performance artists who have been pulling off such acts in the city for almost thirty years. Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing are what some might call social sculptors; they aim, as one recent catalog put it, to make "visible the usually unconsidered patterns of behavior, thought, and life in general." This vision is infused with irony and humor: art pieces conceived by the two have famously required them to wear suits with corporate logos at public appearances for an entire year, walk ten miles around downtown Houston with buckets of water on their feet, and cover a dumpster with gold paint. They have performed as exotic dancers at a ladies' strip joint, worked 24 hours at a Stop-N-Go, and erected fourteen-foot statues of themselves in front of a used-car lot. The Art Guys, in other words, are known as court jesters, Shakespearean fools, or, as the New York Times explained in 1995, "part Dada, part David Letterman . . . a cross between John Cage and the Smothers Brothers." So The Art Guys Marry a Plant—as this wedding performance was titled—was just their latest zany effort. What the two artists had not carefully considered, however, was their timing. The piece, they stated, was intended to raise questions about man's relationship to nature. But it was debuting exactly one year after same-sex marriage had been legalized, to much fanfare, in California—only to be promptly repealed by voters five months later. As other states considered the fallout and as Barack Obama rode into office in 2009 on promises that included repealing the Defense of Marriage Act, a heated conversation about gay rights had begun to grip the country. Houston, a city with the sixth-largest gay community in the nation, was not immune. And suddenly, what had started as a serious goof, or a project that was goofily serious, became something far more akin to an art world version of a WWE SmackDown.

First came a sour review by the Houston Chronicle's art critic, who wrote that the Art Guys and their tree were making light of "the country's hottest civil rights issue." The Art Guys responded that he had it all wrong: they'd always been in favor of gay marriage. Pretty soon, the response to the response, and all the responses that followed, had ginned up a state of hysteria that managed to ensnare the city's only daily newspaper, every major art museum, and just about everyone in the art scene—pitting friend against friend, accelerating at least one very public emotional breakdown, and, in December, inspiring one attempted arboricide. No matter how often and how passionately the Art Guys insisted that their intent had been to address marriage in the broadest, most ancient, and most metaphorical way, no one listened, and no one cared. The two had lit the fuse to a hidden time bomb in a city that prides itself on its tolerance, and the subsequent explosion produced painful questions about the validity of identity politics and the very meaning of art. Was The Art Guys Marry a Plant the city's best piece of public art? Or its worst? Right now, Houston's art community is too war-torn and wounded to answer.



The photo that appeared on the cover of *PaperCity* in 2009. Photo by Everett Taasevigen

We are not the first people to marry a plant,” Galbreth told me without a trace of humor when I visited the sprawling metal building in Acres Homes that serves as the Art Guys’ studio last December. Inside, the cavernous space is like a cross between Pee-wee’s Playhouse and an airplane hangar, with gleaming power tools making way for some of the artists’ works. A gigantic skull rendered with burnt matchsticks hangs on a wall; a black banister inlaid with artificial eyes lines the staircase. The overall atmosphere is of the best boys’ hideout ever.

But the Art Guys aren’t boys anymore. Galbreth, 56, is a tall, loose-limbed man with a shock of graying hair and bushy, hardworking eyebrows. Owing to his modest upbringing in Tennessee, he has something of a courtly, aw-shucks manner, but, maybe owing to his years as a successful artist, he tends to speak with an almost majestic intensity. This means that, depending on the circumstances, Galbreth can resemble a cheerful bag boy at the grocery store or a Pentecostal minister who has just spied the devil in a back pew. Massing, 53, who grew up near Buffalo, New York, is more reserved; his sun-weathered good looks and reticent cool have, more than a few times, inspired comparisons to James Dean.

The Art Guys might not be the most famous artists in Houston, but they are indisputably local fixtures. They met and began working together in 1983, when both attended the University of Houston and fell under the

spell of sculptor James Surls, an earth-father figure with a long black ponytail who was then on his way to becoming internationally known. Soon the Art Guys were earning a reputation themselves; they weren't just talented, they were also young, good-looking, funny, happy to donate work to charity, and had a flair for self-promotion that would have impressed Warhol. ("The Art Guys engage the media because we know media engages the culture," Massing told me.) As they grew in popularity, so too did their commissions; after two decades, the two have graduated to big-time public works, like the candy-colored illuminated suitcases at George Bush Intercontinental Airport, and they were included in Neiman Marcus's 2006 Christmas Book, for their \$40,000 seven-foot skyscraper made of no. 2 pencils. Their catalogs have been printed by the prestige publisher Abrams, and the two have been written about—sometimes at their behest—by major art and cultural scribes such as Dave Hickey. And except for a skirmish last year when they accused filmmaker Morgan Spurlock of ripping off their logo suits idea, the Art Guys have managed to maintain their reputation as good guys.

Of course, that's aside from the uproar over the tree. The idea to marry a plant began several years ago, when Massing and Galbreth were in their forties. Both were married, with a child, and Galbreth had had a frightening health scare, so mortality was on their minds. They launched a project called The Art Guys Lie in State—they did just that, at city hall—and another one called Forever Yours, an as-yet-to-be-completed work in which they hope to sell their remains for \$1 million. But in 2007 Galbreth happened to read about a scientific field called panpsychism—the notion that consciousness might not be limited to humans and animals but also exist in rocks and trees. He began thinking about a piece on commitment to the natural world.

Working in typical fashion, the Art Guys began to ask themselves zillions of questions, like, If a rock is conscious, what might it feel? And just what might be the obligation of human beings to rocks, if they feel? And what about plants? From there, they started thinking about what it would mean to "marry another entity"—like, say, a plant, or then, a tree. They did countless Internet searches and discovered that a University of Texas accounting student of Nepalese descent had married a betel nut (in her tradition, the ritual protected her from becoming a widow) and that ancient Hindu sects married trees ("Tulsi and pipal trees are the most common bridegrooms," stated one website). They researched the history of marriage and studied Texas law. They wondered just how they could marry a tree and whether the tree would care. "These questions are fun. These questions are interesting," Galbreth told me.

The idea of two men marrying a plant also appealed to Toby Kamps, the senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Kamps is an imposing man with willful, jet-black hair and a gloss of East Coast art world polish. As a newcomer to town in 2007, he'd been amazed by the ways Houston artists engaged with their city beyond its museums and galleries—he was a fan of local outsider art like the Orange Show—and he wanted to do an exhibition that celebrated the fact. He and an associate, Meredith Goldsmith, came up

with a show to be called “No Zoning: Artists Engage Houston,” and when the Art Guys mentioned their tree marriage idea, he knew he wanted them in the show. The opening was scheduled for May 2009.

Excited, Galbreth and Massing went to a nursery on U.S. 290 and bought a \$15 eight-year-old live oak.

Then, as often happens with their work, the project grew. They decided that a wedding at their studio wasn't big enough; they wanted to spread the wealth by staging the event in the sculpture garden of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. This was a little like saying that instead of having a debate about nuclear disarmament in your high school classroom you'd like to have it in the Oval Office; the MFAH, for one thing, had a rule against weddings in the garden. But the Art Guys were charming and persistent, and they had friends among the institution's curators and patrons. “Jack and I wanted to engage as many people as possible in the conversation,” Galbreth said. After many meetings, both the CAMH and the MFAH got on board. “We thought this was an amazing, funny coup. They had every reason to say no.”

And because the Art Guys wanted as many guests at the event as they could get, they sent out press releases. They posed in tuxedos, with the tree, on the cover of PaperCity's bridal issue. They offered a cake topper for sale that showed two male figures in formal attire with a plant between them. And on June 13, with their wives and children in attendance, along with art world friends and staff from the two museums, the Art Guys and their oak sapling stood before a makeshift altar. “Art Guys and Tree, I welcome you to this moment in your lives,” declared the minister.

It was a fairly harmless, kind of sweet way to pass a Saturday morning in early summer, and for the Art Guys, a success. But nobody lived happily ever after.

The Houston art world is both sophisticated and provincial. The Rothko Chapel and the Menil Collection—bequeathed by the late philanthropist John de Menil and his oil heiress wife, Dominique, a couple whose influence in matters both artistic and political remains palpable—have become pilgrimage sites for art lovers from around the globe. The city's museum directors look not to Austin and Dallas as competition but to New York, Los Angeles, and London. Its artists, from James Surls and John Alexander to Susie Rosmarin and Dario Robleto, enjoy national reputations. And its patrons, who boast some of the largest fortunes in the country—think fund manager Fayez Sarofim and energy entrepreneur Michael Zilkha—have assembled collections to rival any on the planet. Yet the community remains small and somewhat incestuous, a perfect incubator for fights and feuds. It's the sort of place where egos can be both large and fragile and things can get out of hand fairly quickly.

Douglas Britt stepped into this world as the Houston Chronicle's new art critic in 2008. A compact, energetic 42-year-old with a shaved head, Britt had grown up in the Houston area before going to art school in Massachusetts. He didn't have any particularly impressive bona fides when he was hired; he had returned home to earn a degree in corporate communications from the U of H and volunteer as an intern in the Menil's public affairs office. But from the start, Britt won the art community over with his dedication and his

intellect. He seemed to be at almost every show, introducing himself to the players and expressing genuine interest.

Britt learned of *The Art Guys Marry a Plant* sometime after starting at the newspaper, and he immediately found the idea problematic. As a gay man in a long-term relationship, he considered the notion of two men staging a phony wedding—when someone like him could not get married in Texas—to be tone-deaf. Social sculpture, he believed, was supposed to blur the boundaries of art and life and somehow transform. A work that wasn't in tune with the times—that ignored the social context in which it would be received—was doomed. With each new press release about the tree wedding, Britt grew more annoyed. He soon complained to the CAMH's communications manager and mentioned his concern to Kamps when they ran into each other at an art event.

Britt knew the Art Guys didn't hate gays—everybody in town knew that. This, after all, was a city in which curators, gallery owners, artists, and museum directors—including the director of the CAMH and the director of the MFAH—identified as gay, and the Art Guys had always moved easily in these circles. Nothing in their body of work suggested that they opposed gay rights. But that did not alleviate Britt's concerns. The piece, he told me, wasn't "homophobic," but it was most certainly "heterosexist." Galbreth and Massing, he said, were "oblivious to their own privilege."

Kamps, who is not gay, disagreed. To him, *The Art Guys Marry a Plant* wasn't about same-sex marriage. It was about posterity, about nature persisting while we perished. "It's certain politicians who are against civil rights," Kamps told me. "Not the art world." But as Britt continued to carp, Kamps wondered whether some clarification might be in order. According to the Art Guys, he suggested they issue a press release that explained that the piece wasn't about gay marriage at all. They refused. "In the art world, people want to be told what 'it' means. They want art to have a reason, and Jack and I want to let the work speak for itself," Galbreth told me. Why "pre-defend" a work that was just a typical quirky Art Guys project? Massing agreed. "If we'd wanted to do a piece that ridiculed gay marriage, we wouldn't have married a plant," he said. "We would have done something more satirical."

Soon afterward, Britt sent Galbreth and Massing an email: Could he meet them at the McClain Gallery, where the Art Guys were having their first commercial show in ten years, to talk about that exhibit? The visit lasted more than two hours and, as far as the artists could tell, went well. Talk of the tree marriage came and went. "He was attentive, kind," Galbreth said. "I thought, 'I'm happy to meet this guy.'" Then Galbreth opened the newspaper a few days later and saw Britt's story.

*The Art Guys Marry a Plant* was Britt's sole topic, and according to Galbreth, the critic had either misunderstood or purposefully misconstrued their statements about gay marriage. "I don't even care about that," he'd quoted Galbreth as saying. "It doesn't even warrant discussion." What Galbreth had meant was that the issue of gay marriage was already resolved for him—he was for it. But that was certainly not how

the story made him sound. Britt had also quoted Galbreth (correctly) as saying that the Art Guys were happy to use interest in gay marriage to promote their piece.

The rest of the article was no better. Britt pointed out that the Art Guys couldn't really marry a tree "because the Texas Constitutional Amendment banning gay marriage, which voters passed overwhelmingly in 2005, leaves no wiggle room for quirky exceptions." He also dumped on them for their plans to plant the tree "deep in the woods" instead of allowing it to live with them in perpetuity, like a real spouse. Further, he wrote, the artwork "inadvertently reinforces the 'slippery slope' argument that if we let gays wed, next we'll allow people to marry animals, and so on." Then came the coup de grâce: "Normally I don't critique performances before they occur, but given the nature of this one, I'm speaking now so I don't have to forever hold my peace."

The Art Guys had a policy of not responding to criticism, so they didn't. Britt continued his attacks on the Chronicle's 29-25 blog. "The Art Guys' piece raises—even exploits—the No. 1 civil rights issue of our time only to drop it like a hot potato," he declared. It probably surprised no one when, after attending the June ceremony, Britt immediately panned the performance—though he insisted he took no joy in doing so. (He underscored the point by posting some social sculpture of his own: a video of himself trying and repeatedly failing to take a bottle of Joy dishwashing liquid off a grocery store shelf.) Before long, the blog-osphere was abuzz with anti-Art Guys sentiment. Galbreth, who was furious about being labeled a bigot, responded with his own post on the blog, insisting that The Art Guys Marry a Plant was not about gays, gay rights, or, in fact, anything at all. "It is (as they say) what it is," he wrote. Then he accused Britt of using the same "mangled, biased thinking as that of gay marriage opponents."

Britt let that stand for about a nanosecond. Yes, he knew the Art Guys didn't think their piece was about gay marriage, but once a work was exhibited or performed in public, the artist's ability to control its meaning was limited. He quoted Kamps, who had suggested in the "No Zoning" catalog that "the ensuing debate" about The Art Guys Marry a Plant was supposed to "shape the meaning." Then Britt asked an interesting question: Don't you want your art to take on a life of its own?

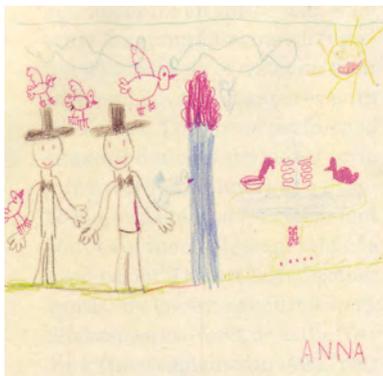
He had a point. The Art Guys, who had long enjoyed a reputation for being Houston's wise fools, had just created what was arguably the most provocative work of their careers. But cast as villains in a drama not of their making, they seemed none too happy about it, trying instead to manage the public's reaction to their deliberately ambiguous piece. Under the circumstances, some people might have retreated, but the Art Guys did the opposite, throwing themselves into phase two of the marriage project: finding a permanent home for their spouse. They wouldn't plant the oak in the woods. They would plant it somewhere safe—and visible. "We wanted it to live for future generations," Galbreth explained.

They approached the Menil, the MFAH, and even Rice University, offering the tree as a donation, but every institution turned them down. "We pretty much gave up and left it potted in the studio," Massing said. But

then, as fate would have it, the Menil hired Kamps to be its curator of modern and contemporary art, and he began to discuss the tree with the museum's director, Josef Helfenstein. The tree had one very powerful ally, Michael Zilkha. A major player in global energy, Zilkha was both a Menil trustee and an unabashed fan of the Art Guys. And so it came to be that in March 2011 the sapling quietly made the move from Acres Homes to the Menil grounds. It was accepted into the permanent collection in July, as a donation from the Art Guys in honor of Zilkha and his wife, Nina.

Few people can view art through anything but the lens of their own experience; indeed, its very power comes from its ability to mirror our doubts, yearnings, and dreams. This is why public art can be so dicey. One need only think of Richard Serra's Tilted Arc, a wall of steel that bisected Federal Plaza, in New York, and infuriated government workers, or Maya Lin's black gash of a Vietnam memorial that insulted many veterans. But it is also why public art is so powerful: it can propel people into action, even when no one can predict what that action might be.

One day in early fall 2011, a prominent gallery owner named Hiram Butler read in the Menil's membership bulletin that The Art Guys Marry a Plant—or at least the actual plant—had been acquired by the museum and that a dedication/performance piece was scheduled in its honor for November. Butler, who is sixty years old and gay, had married his partner in Quaker ceremonies in Texas and Massachusetts in 2007, an act that had changed his life profoundly. “When I came out and was accepted, I felt that I had broken the last barrier,” he told me. “It wasn't until I was married that I realized I had broken one more.”



A drawing made for gallery owner Hiram Butler by a young friend on the occasion of his 2007 wedding depicting two men in tuxedos with a tree.

But Butler also had institutional memory. He remembered, for instance, how when he was losing a friend a month to AIDS, Louie Welch, a former Houston mayor trying to return to office in 1985, was asked what to do about the epidemic. “Shoot the queers,” Welch had replied. Butler, like Britt, believed that The Art Guys Marry a Plant mocked the struggle that had shaped his life. That the Menil now housed the piece and planned, for all purposes, to publicly celebrate it was, he felt, appalling.

Butler is not a large man, but with his close-cropped hair, rimless glasses, and deliberate, precise manner, he radiates the authority of a very demanding law professor. He has a reputation for feuding; he has crossed

swords and then reconciled with many people in Houston's art world, including James Surls, who was once his star artist and business partner. Butler's first strike was to personally call on the Menil's director of public programs to complain about the dedication. He wanted the tree removed and felt frustrated by what he perceived to be Helfenstein's reluctance to meet with him. The Menil was known for its founders' dedication to civil rights; how could the museum accept a piece that degraded those beliefs?

The museum's public information officer, a gay man and a vocal proponent of gay rights named Vance Muse, had long been concerned about the tree as well (disclosure: Muse is a close friend). Another ceremony involving the oak, he warned Kamps and Helfenstein, could provoke an outcry the museum had to be ready to face. But the curator and director weren't worried. "It was a piece about a tree," Kamps stressed to me. He was about to learn differently. Butler's fury may not have been universally shared, but he was not alone either. Most people, went the thinking, know it's wrong to play "Dixie" at public events or to post sexy pinups at the office. So why was the museum championing a piece that was painful to so many? As one artist explained, "Part of the offense was that [the Art Guys] said they hadn't thought about it. Then you're not really thinking." As a preemptive peace offering, the Menil issued its own explanation in a flyer announcing the dedication. "At a time when the institution of marriage is at the center of civil rights debates," it began, "the tree ceremony may inspire multiple readings and interpretations."

The Art Guys were outraged at this description of their work—but not outraged enough to quit. Instead, they busied themselves planning the dedication. They had already arranged to have fabled New Yorker cultural critic and National Book Critics Circle Award winner Lawrence Weschler speak at the ceremony (he was working with Massing and Galbreth at the time on an unrelated book), and now they reached out to their old mentor, Surls, to speak too. Butler promptly called the sculptor and asked him to withdraw from the ceremony. Surls insisted on speaking. "I told him that everyone I knew in the art community would fight to the teeth for his or anyone else's right to be married to whomever they choose," he said to me. Butler was also steamed over what he felt was the Menil's institutional blindness toward gays. "What they haven't figured out yet is that good intentions are not enough," he told me. "They have to be responsible for the results of their actions." He paused. "Artists can be willfully ignorant," he declared. "Institutions cannot." It was around this time that Britt decided to weigh in again. His criticism of *The Art Guys Marry a Plant*, he felt, had not been enough, and throughout the fall, he brooded. Finally, inspiration hit. He would stage a performance piece of his own—one that would be called *The Art Gay Marries a Woman*. In a blog post on November 8, he advertised for a wife, explaining that "my betrothal to a random female colleague would have a legal validity missing not just from the Art Guys' 'marriage' to the tree but from every committed U.S. gay couple's marriage," given that same-sex marriage wasn't universally recognized. Britt scheduled his wedding to take place on November 18, the night before the tree dedication. "We did it deliberately so people could go to both and make up their minds which was best," he told me.

So it happened that on a cool Houston night at around ten-thirty, about two hundred people crammed into Tony's Corner Pocket, a gay strip joint west of downtown. (Britt picked the venue as a nod to the earlier performance piece by the Art Guys at a ladies' strip club.) The crowd included regulars from the bar along with art world types such as the director of the CAMH and Butler. Britt wore a tuxedo and, instead of a bow tie, a leather collar and white organdy scarf. His bride, who wore a traditional wedding dress, was a young, heavysset, good-natured woman named Reese Darby.

The actual event echoed *The Boys in the Band* more than *The Art Guys Marry a Plant*. The minister, a friend of Britt's who was ordained by the Universal Life Church, had the happy couple promise to respect "the freaks, sluts, and sex workers of all stripes who prefer not to conform to heteronormative conventions." They also vowed to "refrain from major purchases until the divorce is final." Instead of wedding rings there were Ring Pops, and as Britt noted, there was "beefcake instead of wedding cake." And by the end of the evening, Britt—now legally Douglas Britt-Darby—had bested the Art Guys: he had really married for art.

People who knew him well thought Britt seemed a little lost that night, wandering alone under the harsh lights of the bar after most of his friends had left. He'd had some trouble finding a faux wife; though various art critics he'd approached had been intrigued with his proposal—and blogged about it incessantly, to the Art Guys' dismay—they'd had issues, like real boyfriends and real lawyers, that stopped them. (Darby hunted Britt down on Twitter and volunteered a few days before the ceremony.) The rejections to his proposals had been oddly painful, and Britt had been wracked with self-doubt about putting himself on the line in a performance piece. Then, too, he had noticed that the Menil's biggest players were conspicuously absent. That rejection—of his work of art—stung.

Still, the next morning he showed up for the tree dedication. The oak, taller and fuller than it had been in March, stood placidly rooted in a circle of moist black soil. A commemorative plaque announcing the date of the marriage gleamed in place. But the mood among the crowd of eighty or so was less festive than anticipated. The Art Spouse, it turned out, had been receiving death threats. ("I can't support the remedy some have suggested—that rogue elements harm the tree, which never had a say in the matter," Britt wrote on his blog. "Make art, not herbicide.") The dedication, then, turned out to be particularly reflective of contemporary times: plainclothes security officers were in attendance, and Britt and his new wife handed out flyers in protest. Galbreth and Massing left their children at home.

The first speaker, a bearded, animated Weschler, had watched the unfolding drama in Houston with a bemused and heavy heart. To him, the work was only tangentially about gay rights and had been eclipsed by political correctness. Same-sex marriage was important—and would be accepted by everyone, he believed—but it wasn't as pressing as, say, the oppression of women by Islamic fundamentalists or the ecological devastation of the planet. "Identity politics have destroyed intellectual life in America," he told me later. Because people had lost their sense of proportion, "it's wiped out a generation of thought." Eventually, he

added, the saga of The Art Guys Marry a Plant might serve as a paradigm for the tragicomic state of American cultural life at the beginning of the twenty-first century. “The Ph.D. dissertation on this is going to be fantastic.”

Weschler opened with a whimsical Talmudic discourse on whether or not a tree could consent to its planting. He transitioned to the drought (“This tree, as it grows, will be a memory of that terrible season”), then moved on to reverently recite three high-toned tree-related works from Denise Levertov, Kay Ryan, and Houston homeboy Donald Barthelme. Then Surls walked to the lectern. In late middle age, he was as burly as ever, and his now silver hair framed his face with careless Byronic curls. In his East Texas twang, he ruminated about his own marriages and the nature of thought in the universe. He read a poem he’d written. (“What difference to Wind is Dust? / What difference to Snow is Hawk? / What difference to Rock is Sky?”) But then Surls did what no one else had done publicly. He spoke about the pain that The Art Guys Marry a Plant had brought to some, and he made a plea for unity. “The gay community and the art community,” he said, “are so intertwined that I would have to say we are the best friends that we have. That really has to be preserved.”

For one brief, shining moment, it seemed that, as Surls said later, “the issue was done and over.” Massing shook Britt’s hand. So did Galbreth. “Douglas, I am very happy to see you,” Galbreth said, meaning every word. “I am so happy you are here.”

What people did not know was that Britt had started to unravel. After four years together, he and his partner had split up the same summer that the Art Guys had married the tree, and he had recently been pulling seventy-hour weeks at the cash-strapped Chronicle, covering not just art but the society beat too (disclosure: my husband is an editor at the Chronicle). And though no one knew exactly what, something about his wedding seemed to have affected him deeply. Still, no one was prepared for what came next.

On the day after Thanksgiving, Massing called Galbreth. “Check out these links I’m sending you,” he said. Galbreth sat down at his computer, clicked on YouTube, and went white. The first video showed a shirtless Britt, neck and jaw muscles clenched, raving that neither the Art Guys nor anyone from the Menil had come to his wedding, or rather to “a performance by someone on the biggest art platform in the city.” (“Are you f—ing kidding me? But anyway . . .”) He went on for about four minutes, insisting that the Menil should be ashamed for taking the tree into its permanent collection. In the next video, a breathless, nearly incoherent Britt stormed up to the tree and sprinkled his shaved body hair on its roots in what he called a “guerrilla offering.” Then he sucked hard on a Ring Pop and put that on the tree, breaking a small branch in the process. Another video showed Britt again naked to the waist, flexing his muscles “after a hot beatdown” and wearing a Mexican wrestler’s mask, his body marked with bruises. For the first time since he’d married the tree, Galbreth felt afraid.

The next day, Britt was at it again. He posted another video, this time wearing nothing above the waist but a fedora, and confessed that he had once been a male prostitute and a methamphetamine addict. He was working on a memoir for the newspaper, he said, that linked sexual prostitution with what he perceived to be the art world's prostitution—including the Menil's. Claiming that the Chronicle had asked him to remove the names of some powerful patrons from the piece before publication, Britt withdrew the story and added the newspaper to his list of "hos." (A Chronicle representative, speaking on background, said Britt's piece would never have run—for his own good.) Britt then declared that he would be taking a leave of absence to create a new social sculpture: he had put himself in a meth-like state through sleep deprivation and now intended to retrace a drug-fueled cross-country trip he had made seven years earlier that landed him at a Massachusetts state hospital and finally forced him to get clean. He hoped this work would provoke a dialogue about art, museums, and prostitution. Then Britt hit the road, heading first to Art Basel, in Miami Beach, and then up the East Coast.

Meanwhile, Galbreth was about to have a meltdown of his own. The continuing strife had sent the blogosphere into overdrive. One writer suggested the Art Guys be sprayed with Mace. Others threatened the tree. Butler, for his part, was still complaining—vociferously—to Menil board members and to Helfenstein. Galbreth had had it. Two years earlier, the Art Guys had lain in state at city hall. Was that about gay death? What if two gay guys had married the tree? Would that have made a difference? And why was Butler accusing them of being homophobic when he knew they weren't?

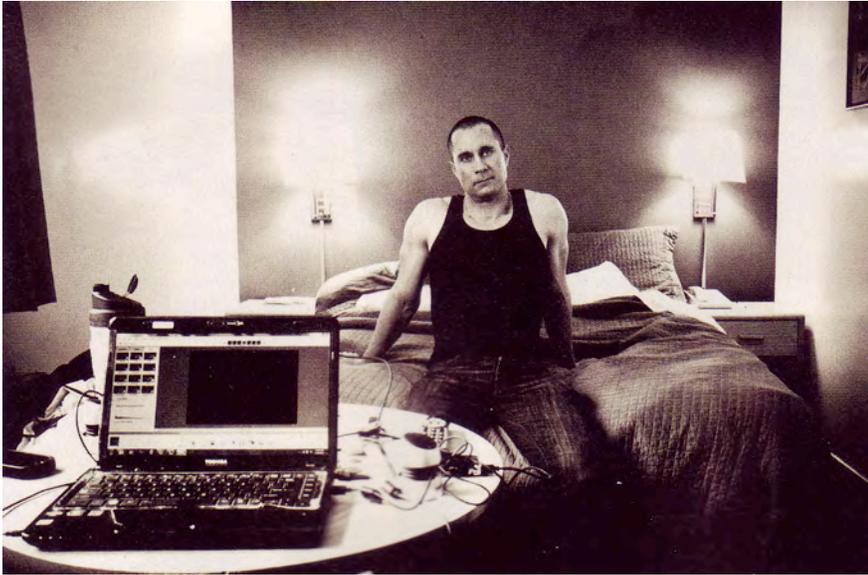
On November 29, with Massing along as his witness, Galbreth drove to Butler's gallery with the intention of telling him just what he thought—that he, Butler, was a liar and a coward. Butler was walking in the oleander grove between his gallery and his home as the two pulled up; taking in their body language, he felt certain he was about to be attacked. There are conflicting accounts of the actual words exchanged at that point (Butler claims that Galbreth called him "a coward and an evil f—"), though no one disputes that Butler ordered Galbreth and Massing to leave, which they did. He then called the police, who urged him to press charges. "Hotheads repeat," the officer warned. Whatever was left of a friendship of more than two decades had been obliterated.

In mid-December, I caught up with Britt at a Days Inn on Connecticut Avenue in Washington, D.C. He had arrived the night before, and he seemed as cheerful and articulate as he had always been, discussing the art he had seen on the road as he fielded calls from clients old and new. Britt seemed relieved that he was no longer carrying any secrets; he was now going by Devon, his old professional name. He had started a blog called Reliable Narratives, where he also posted pages from the diary he had kept in his previous days as an escort, as well as a tab with his current prices—\$200 an hour, \$750 for an overnight.

"I hate all this nastiness," he told me, referring to the tree saga. He is still annoyed that no heavy hitters from the Menil came to his wedding—"[Kamps] should have been there," he told me—and he thought the Art

Guys were “confusing stubbornness with integrity.” He said too that it had been an honor when the Chronicle fired him after he proposed his journey. He knew that his videos looked crazy—he’d been a little unnerved himself when he’d reviewed them—but he felt the road trip had set him on a path that integrated art with all aspects of his life. “I’m apprehensive about what’s next, but I feel great about the wedding piece,” he told me. “Hopefully it will land me in the next place that’s an ideal fit.”

I hoped so too. But Britt’s hotel room faced an air shaft and smelled of dirty laundry, which was scattered about the room. He was storing his belongings in plastic boxes, including favorite pieces of art and a few keepsakes. I worried that his next performance might be titled “Do I Exist If I Am Not Observed?”



Former Chronicle art critic Douglas Britt at a Rodeway Inn in San Francisco in January 2012. Photo by Leann Mueller.

As many spouses know, happy endings are hard to come by. On the night of December 3 someone entered the park beside the Menil, padded across the lush Saint Augustine, and, ignoring Mark di Suvero’s vigilant metal sculpture *Bygones*, took an ax or just one very heavy foot and splintered the Art Guys’ tree in two. The police, called to the scene by Menil security the next morning, launched an immediate, if somewhat quixotic, investigation. “A Tree Dies in Montrose” declared the headline for the story on the website CultureMap Houston. “Controversial Art Guys project at Menil Park vandalized.” There were no leads, and the most obvious suspect, Britt, was in Miami at the time.

The Art Guys got no sympathy. PaperCity, which had once made them cover boys, now suggested they move the injured tree to a city park until marriage rights were granted to all. The author of a laudatory master’s thesis on the Art Guys now blamed them in a local weekly for setting back conceptual art and Houston’s reputation. The Huffington Post printed an essay co-authored by an international art scholar (and an artist in Butler’s gallery) titled “Homophobia in the Arts” that insinuated the Art Guys might have vandalized the tree themselves as another publicity stunt; it also referenced the rising number of gay suicides in the country. Britt, for his part, suggested in his new blog that the lack of security around the tree showed

the Menil's lack of commitment to the piece. "It seems like the entire art community is different now," Massing said softly, in one of our last interviews. "There's the gay community and the art community. In my little world, sides have been taken. Now I see the rift."

Last month, the Menil was considering plans to host a public conversation on the tree fight—just as, coincidentally, an appeals court struck down California's gay marriage ban. "What I really find disappointing is that the interpretation of the work has been narrowed down so much," Helfenstein explained. He sympathizes with those who suffered because of *The Art Guys Marry a Plant*, "but the attempt to force us into this corner is not right. Who's to say what a work really means?" Sometimes, he continued, artists don't even understand the meaning or the consequences of their work—that's for time to decide. "You can project a hundred things onto a tree."

Thanks to the museum's expert grounds-keepers, that is still possible. The live oak, for now a frail stump just over two feet tall, with three scraggly branches grasping at the air, is expected to survive. It's a different piece of art now, with a different meaning. But as it grows taller and stronger, that too will change.



The bottom half of the tree at the Menil. Photo by Leann Mueller.