

Art Crawl Houston founders still party like it's 1984

Molly Glentzer | Nov. 20, 2019



Mother Dog Studio founders and directors John Runnels and Charlie Jean Sartwelle in the entrance to the space, which hosts the 27th annual Art Crawl Saturday.

Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

With the countdown on to Saturday's Art Crawl Houston 2019, John Runnels and Charlie Jean Sartwelle were scrambling earlier this week.

They had art to hang, studios to tidy, an installation to finish; and a plumber was making emergency repairs to the old cast-iron pipes beneath the Mother Dog Studios building.

But then, the couple really never expected the going to be easy when they founded Houston's oldest artist warehouse 35 years ago. They just wanted life on their own terms.

"What does an artist stand for in society?" Runnels said. "To me, we stand for an excess of freedom. That's what I want Mother Dog Studios to represent."

The crawl itself is partly a show of artistic survival. Runnels and Sartwelle, now gray but still as feisty as ever, have long lived by the motto, "How small can we stay and still maintain our mission?"

They have proudly kept both Mother Dog and the annual crawl on the Saturday before Thanksgiving an all-volunteer, artist-run "non-organization," resisting offers to hand over the enterprise to promoters who might turn it into something grander and flashier.

ART CRAWL Houston 2019

When: 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Saturday; some studios also open Sunday

Where: 720 Walnut and 19 other locations

Details: Free; artcrawlhouston.com

This studio tour remains, almost stubbornly, a last vestige of the art scene that existed in the 1980s. It does not take in “the corporate warehouses,” as Runnels calls the well-funded studio compounds around the Silos at Sawyer Yards.

Runnels likes to tell a story about how police officers patrolling the area were shocked to see Sartwelle there when the couple leased the 22,000-square foot building from the Perlmutter family in 1984. They warned her not to come back to the dangerous area without a sawed-off shotgun, he said.

Wild with passion and vision, the creative urban pioneers of that era didn't need fancy studios with air conditioning. They needed big and cheap space. The cluster of decrepit early 20th century buildings just north of downtown, near the Harris County Jail complex, suited them fine.

Changing neighborhood

Originally built in 1925 as a covered, railroad-to-truck crossdock freight terminal, the Mother Dog building also had housed a shop that made store fixtures, a cardboard box company and Dixie Glass Company. During floods — most recently Hurricane Harvey — the loading dock area still fills with a good six feet of water. The pier-and-beam building was designed to work “like a river, so water could flow through,” Sartwelle explained. (Cleaning up afterward with Clorox is a two-day routine.)

Today, the neighborhood is not so raw, already established as a playground for urban redevelopers. “We've seen so many changes,” Runnels says. Virtually every building around Mother Dog has changed hands in the past six months, he adds. He knows the Perlmutter have been approached by potential buyers. But for now, Mother Dog is holding out and still proudly “non air-controlled.”

This year's Crawl stretches from the University of Houston-Downtown to Canal Street Studios in the East End, where Sounds of Cinema will finish the day with a free outdoor screening of videos by local artists. Hardy & Nance Studios, where about 50 artists work, is walking distance from Mother Dog. So is the stalwart Last Concert Cafe, which got an infusion of cash this year from entrepreneurs Jon Deal, Todd Johnson and Kevin Hanratty. (Runnels is not happy that they painted over the restaurant's Frida Kahlo-esque mural.)

Mother Dog's original 12 studios have been subdivided over the years, to keep them more affordable. About 25 artists work there now, although the number fluctuates. In addition to the open studios, Runnels curates a themed show in the halls each year.

He likes nature-based themes. In the past, he's mounted shows based on flower and garden ideas, trees, horses, insects (that one he called “Don't Bug Me”) and live snakes. This year's theme — “Mother. Nature. Human. Nature. Back. To. Nature.” — gives him leeway to expose his really freewheeling side. Meaning nudes are plentiful.

He's especially proud of a huge graphite portrait of himself, one of two large nudes by Fernando Casas. He's also showing a recent series of photographs he made of nude women walking their dogs along Buffalo Bayou, a project that took some speed and stealth.

'Not a street festival'

Runnels is well known for public art projects, including his steel "Dream Boat" arbors at Buffalo Bayou Park and his language-based, etched stone work at MetroRail's Central Station. But at Mother Dog, his unfettered imagination runs wild across several studios.

To Sartwelle's chagrin, he tends to "colonize" vacant spaces. He's been making art a very long time, and he's not ready to stop. Works made with oven doors; glass-enclosed bookcase sculptures that hold repurposed books, some covered in bark or lace bras, and stacks of paintings and drawings consume his main studio. Another holds furniture he covered in cigarette butts. Another holds large paintings in progress, inspired by bird illustrations Runnels loved as a kid. The murals on the outside of the building also are his.

Sartwelle's work is well represented, too. They've hung several of her large, quilt-based paintings from the 1990s, and she has readied a new suite of her funny, miniature Mother Dog collages. Ken Mazzu, Thedra Cullar-Ledford, Trina McIsaac, Tanna Bennett and Solomon Kane are among others featured in the show. Not all are tenants in the building since the studios basically serve as galleries, too. Runnels invites outsiders to "bring in new energy," he said.

The band Heights Fools on Stools will perform Saturday at Mother Dog. But, Runnels said, "this is not a street festival. Not even an art festival. It's an open house of working artists' studio spaces."

True. But these artists do know how to have a good time. Beverages and mixers were stacked on a table near the door, where the bar will be.

"My favorite part," Runnels said.

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