

Margo Handwerker

Jim Pirtle: Painting, Performance, Petroleum, and Polyester

When Jim Pirtle turned a dilapidated downtown building into a notorious after-hours hot spot, he also created one of the most unusual artist-run spaces for alternative art and music in Houston, an increasingly popular city for working artists in recent years. The fourth largest city in the United States, Houston offers world-class resources like the Menil Collection and the Museum of Fine Arts, and yet artists here can afford an apartment large enough to work in or a generously sized studio, both for a modest price. Houston has remained relatively prosperous thanks to its cash cow, the petroleum industry, and private and public art patrons who thrive in this environment, supporting the city's artists and arts organizations.

The level of camaraderie among artists in Houston provides a built-in social network distinct from more competitive art communities. The Core Program at the Museum of Fine Arts, which just celebrated its 25th anniversary, has attracted artists from around the United States and abroad, while the medical and petrochemical industries draw a workforce of international professionals and their artist spouses. Even artists who choose to leave the city for art capitals like Los Angeles and New York often maintain gallery representation in Houston, returning regularly for exhibitions and other events. The supportive environment fosters a flexible and entrepreneurial spirit among Houston's artists, who, since the 1970s, have stimulated the local art world by establishing a network of artist-run exhibition venues. Jim Pirtle's own site epitomizes the do-it-yourself attitude characteristic of these alternative spaces, which have laid the foundation for Houston's burgeoning art scene.

Guitar cases and vintage credenzas, mismatched shoes and outmoded ladies' furs, a century's worth of random relics have been squirreled away in Pirtle's second-floor studio at 314 Main Street. A readymade of sorts, the hideaway looks more or less the same as it did when Pirtle purchased the building in 1996 from a New York businessman who, for nearly 50 years, suffered a series of retail failures, from clothing stores to pawnshops. Pirtle embraces these experimental roots, having leased the upstairs studio to offbeat tenants like the vanguard dance troupe, Easy Credit Theater, and the underground newspaper, *Houston's Other*. In the storefront downstairs, he manages notsuOH (Houston spelled backwards), a 21st-

century Cabaret Voltaire, where instead of Hugo Ball, Emmy Hennings, or Tristan Tzara; dancer Richard Hubscher, guitarist Aaron Loesch and bands like the Free Radicals and Negativland experiment with new music and performance. Pirtle compares the downtown enterprise to a Charles Dickens novel, where a cross section of classes converges to imbibe and unwind. "3.14 is π ," Pirtle emphasizes, "It's like a town center." Geographically, he points out, the building is at the heart of Houston's history, three blocks southwest of Buffalo Bayou and three blocks northeast of Texas Avenue—one of the initial thoroughfares plotted by the brothers John Kirby Allen and Augustus Chapman Allen when they founded the city in 1836. Built 60 years later in 1893, 314 Main Street is a pivotal place in more ways than one. It is a haven for eccentric Houstonians, and, like its clientele, notsoH is an outcast set amid trendier venues nearby.

For his exhibition at CUE Art Foundation, Pirtle has exported a slice of life from 314 Main Street, installing an edited version of his helter-skelter studio-turned-makeshift meeting place. A spirited nod to Claes Oldenburg's *Store* and Gordon Matta-Clark's *Food*, the installation merges wallpaper customized for Pirtle by painter Aaron Parazette with antique auditorium seats and yellowed accounting ledgers, a mountain of tangled wire coat hangers and a wall of women's shoes. The trove of spectacular castaways is an ironic shrine to commodity fetishism and the narrowing divide between art and commerce. Visitors are invited to occupy the space much as they do at the Houston site—to linger at will and to trample, over time, the collage of photographs taped haphazardly to the floor. The informal environment embodies the collective spirit of Rirkrit Tiravanija's Relational Art as described by Nicolas Bourriaud, which Tiravanija equates to removing Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* from the pedestal, and then returning it to the wall to use as intended. Pirtle unwittingly takes the analogy a step further by using the gallery as a vitrine for his social sculpture, thereby aestheticizing his public practice, and placing Duchamp's sullied urinal back on the pedestal once more.

Jim Pirtle's own polyester paintings feature prominently in the installation. A self-described polyester addict—in the early 1990s, he wrapped his home in the garish, synthetic fabric—Pirtle scours second-hand stores for "radically bizarre" patterns, on which he renders deliberately crude pictures à la Sigmar Polke. Shirts printed with Alberto Vargas pin-ups and Parisian cafe scenes by Henri de Toulouse-

Lautrec become the backgrounds for Pirtle's untitled portraits, many of which are loosely named for their sitters. A likeness of Salvador Dalí is painted over printed images of the surrealist's own making, while a classic figure study is sketched over a genre scene by Vermeer. The assemblages are whimsical evocations of Robert Rauschenberg's combines, but more capricious than their *Unmonumental* counterparts on view at the New Museum last winter, the critics' response to which unveiled a widespread reluctance to imagine found objects as materials alone, devoid of their art-historical implications.

In advance of the CUE project, Pirtle broadened the scope of his practice by initiating a blog on notsuoH's MySpace page, which he personally updates with entries ranging from aggravated accounts of broken windows and cell-phone mishaps, to irreverent personality profiles and wry political commentary. He describes the posts as "sketches," as a way of capturing the inherently hasty quality of life at 314 Main Street in a more tangible way. The most compelling entries are nostalgic recollections on the heyday of performance art in Houston, an era epitomized by the Art Guys, curators of the CUE exhibition, who amused audiences with playful stunts at some of the city's earliest alternative-art establishments.

Pirtle himself has been performing since elementary school, when he feigned a stomach virus at the start of each day to avoid attending classes. Pirtle would later incorporate these voluntary convulsions into his body art—masochistic behaviors that ranged from pissing into a pint glass, then drinking from it, to singing lounge music while guzzling hot sauce and mayonnaise. Inspired by the desperation that he witnessed as an orderly at Austin State Hospital, these obscene antics evoke the visceral performances of Paul McCarthy and the violence of Viennese Actionism, while other events recall the chance of Fluxus works and the non-art of Allan Kaprow's *Happenings*. In a memorable act of *détournement*, Pirtle once fractured his back preparing for a performance inspired by *Brewster McCloud*, Robert Altman's fantastic tale of young man who builds a pair of wings to free himself from life in the Houston Astrodome. Pirtle jumped from a 12-foot ladder at the Zocalo Theater and landed in a "preacher's seat" on the concrete floor.

This "sad clown" has staged actions as melancholy as they are mischievous—once using his body as the scrim for a poetic film collage featuring three generations of his family—and it is this sentimentality that permeates Pirtle's installation at CUE. The exhibition pays homage to Houston and to the history of 314 Main Street (where the artist adds his own grandmother was a sales clerk in 1919), and glorifies the cavalier atmosphere that exists there still.

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All quotes are from interviews with the author.

The writer, **Margo Handwerker**, is the curatorial assistant of modern and contemporary art and the curatorial assistant of prints and drawings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX, where she contributed to the catalogue *Singular Multiples: The Peter Blum Edition Archive, 1980-1994* (2006) and curated such exhibitions as *Beyond Impressions: Symbolist Works on Paper from the MFAH* (2006). Handwerker is an instructor at the Glassell School of Art in Houston, as well as a regular contributor to *Art Lies: A Contemporary Art Quarterly* and *Glasstire: Texas Visual Art Online*. She graduated with an M.A. in art history, theory and criticism from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, IL in 2005 and will be entering Princeton University's doctoral program in Architecture in Fall of 2008.

The mentor was **Mary Haus**, a former managing editor of *ARTnews* and *COLORS* and currently is the marketing and communications director at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX. She has contributed to *Artforum*, *Travel + Leisure* and *Town and Country* in addition to *ARTnews*, and is a member of the Association Internationale de Critics d'Art, US Chapter. During 1994-2003, she was Director of Communications at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY.