

AUSTIN ART GARAGE

FINDING URBAN CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE MOST SURPRISING SPACES

Walking up to the unassuming garage space down a dirt path off South Lamar in Austin, Texas, you may very well be walking to a vintage Schwinn repair shop or an artisan woodworking studio that specializes in custom wooden highchair making for fashionable babies who wear cloth diapers. But the simple sign on the door to Austin Art Garage is fitting in that it describes exactly what you are about to enter, as well as in tune with the nondescript corner in which it is nestled among other crafting and woodworking spaces.

“When people walk away from this place, they walk down this dirt road and they go, ‘Wow – this is what Art Garage is,’” said Jake Bryer, one half of the duo who owns and operates Austin Art Garage. Bryer brims with a casual and approachable persona, like the gallery itself.

Located in prime yet modest real estate space behind Strut, the urban contemporary Austin Art Garage gallery embodies the 78704 spirit. The 1,000-square-foot space opened in July 2007 when Bryer saw

a gap in the Austin art community. The city needed a place where talented, emerging artists could display and sell their art in addition to or instead of a typical ostentatious gallery, while avoiding the art shows, fairs and festivals.

“I kind of wanted to have a gallery for people who want to buy their first art piece, and it goes back to my first experience,” Bryer said, recalling his own first-time venture into purchasing original art. When Bryer first sought out to find gallery

art, he often found that many prices were not listed, the setting was intimidating and he was nervous about asking questions. With Austin Art Garage, Bryer wanted a relaxed atmosphere to focus on creating a space that puts his customers at ease but still presents unique art work that can be taken seriously. He’s spent the past five years creating his own brand of laid-back haven for art collectors.

Stepping into the Art Garage space takes you into a different world than you might

expect. While the space is small, Bryer and business partner Joel Ganucheau manage to feature around 300 pieces on average at any given time, in addition to the smaller, gift-size pieces. The wall-covered inventory changes regularly, and Bryer has committed to building long-term relationships with the artists who display at Austin Art Garage. The owner duo has some steady artists who've been displaying since the doors opened and keep an open door policy. Bryer knows that when the artist sells, they want more art to fill up the space, so they need those relationships to help the artists grow and they grow together. While no artist exclusively shows in this gallery, many have been exhibiting here for years, building their Austin fan base organically, like Judy Paul and Graham Franciose. The goal for Austin Art Garage is to serve as a branch off the artist's tree to help them grow. Bryer and Ganucheau both note that it's nice to see how artists have progressed over the years have not lost themselves in the process.

"I wanted to make it cool and desirable enough to where people seek us out, and I feel like we've accomplished that with this gallery," Bryer said.

When taking on new artists, Bryer and Ganucheau have only two requirements: 1. The artist must live and be based in Austin, Texas, and 2. The artist must be an emerging, undiscovered talent. Austin Art Garage only accepts online submissions from artists, but it is not uncommon for Bryer and Ganucheau to seek out artists on their own.

"We just had faith that it was a good idea," Bryer said. Their low-key artist lifestyle and the popularity of the gallery and the web site receive a constant flow of traffic.

Bryer and Ganucheau's approach is unlike other galleries in that they display the art without a lot of space in between each piece, making for a wildly stimulating

art feast for the eyes. The art featured in Austin Art Garage includes mixed media, acrylic, water color, photography and many other media. While all medium types are represented, you won't find a lot of 3-D art or sculpture simply because the valued wall and floor spaces are already dedicated to Bryer's

original vision of showcasing two-dimensional art.

As an ecommerce art site selling the art online, this business model helps Bryer manage the art and inventory and can allow artists to showcase and make room

for other emerging artists. All art pieces are listed online including sizes, descriptions and prices to make it easy to buy art and have it shipped anywhere. Bryer definitely understands one segment of his buyers: the first time buyer.

"I suspect that the younger generation who are buying their first art pieces expect to go online and be able to find what they're looking for in any commodity. They go online to research, so we built this online gallery for people to see and do some market research before they actually come in here, so a lot of our customers are really informed about what we have when they come in the gallery," Bryer said. "When they come in the gallery, they are pleasantly surprised because they'd only been looking at a photo online at first."

Bryer's advice to first-time art collectors is simple: when you see a piece of artwork and you walk away from it and you keep thinking about it, then you should have it. That is how you know. "Especially if it's an original because there's only one original," he noted.

Bryer claims to be a very hands-off gallery curator because he wants collectors to be guided to the right art that resonates with them. He likes to introduce himself to his customers then quietly steps away to let the customer make the decision. Or at times, he can direct them to a custom piece or a certain artist. The day this author visited the gallery, Bryer had created a large custom wooden headboard fitted with one of his signature photos stretched across gallery canvas on the wood depicting the graffiti-tagged railroad bridge across Lady Bird Lake with the Austin skyline in the background. Bryer is an artist himself who likes to hone in on particular color schemes or elements in a photograph that he uses to layer in post-process to create a cohesive, yet unique, piece of art.

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Before this special artistic business venture could take place, Ganucheau worked at an art publishing company, so he'd spent years handling and looking at other people's art and knew what sold and what didn't. Bryer worked in marketing in the corporate world but wanted something better. When he started looking for art for his own home, an idea sparked and a seed for the gallery was planted.

"It was an exciting moment when I realized I'd never bought any original art before, so I decided to go find an original art piece to replace another one," Bryer said. He and his wife found a compromise to replace an existing piece of art work in their home.

"I was really disappointed in what Austin had to offer. It should be something easier than this and not so high-brow. It should be accessible to people," Bryer said.

Originally, Bryer asked his artist friends where they showcased their art to the public, and they confirmed there really wasn't an adequate space for emerging artists to show their work. Eventually, he found the existing space and started the gallery on the weekend. Within this space, which he later expanded in the building, Bryer seems to have found a good medium between the high-end galleries and buying art off a wall in a coffee shop.

"I've always been a creative person but had always been in corporate jobs," Bryer said. Associating with creative artists and being exposed to new, funky business venture concepts helped provide the catalyst for him to decide to get out and do something creative like these people.

"That was sort of an inspiration for me early on, and finally my gears started switching," Bryer said. "I think it's really a nice secret in Austin that there is this place that has a lot of attainable art work."

Listed often as one of the top things to do in Austin in various lists and publications, Austin Art Garage's inventory is ever changing. As a supporter of emerging artists, a buyer can quickly become part of that artist's story early on.

"I think art is about connectivity," Bryer said. "When an artist makes something, it's because they're connected to a feeling, whether it is just a feeling or tied to something real, but I think that the idea is it resonates and people gravitate toward that connection that the artist had, and they connect to that feeling or that experience that is reflected in the art work."

The art is a lifelong experience for the artist and what inspires them, and then the collector can be inspired by that, too.

When Jake Bryer opened his gallery in 2007, he didn't expect to use the opportunity to jumpstart his own work as an artist. Since then, Bryer has been using the space to display his unique take on photography.

Bryer's photography incorporates various photos of different scenes and textures, and he uses Photoshop to layer the images in post-process to create art. Bryer likes to find a base image and the texture and then carries that through thematically in the piece.

"I try to constantly make art and change it so the whole series is always evolving," Bryer said. His photography series have included a hometown series in Austin, as well as other series locations focusing on Grenada, Mexico and New York.

While his work mimics paintings, the final medium is gallery canvas. Bryer builds frames for the canvases, prints his photos on the canvas then coats the canvas with special acrylic gloss coating for UV protection and water-proofing, which gives the piece shimmering sheen.

Using a Cannon T2i and various lenses, most of Bryer's creative effects happen during the post-processing graphic design phase, like creating tilt-shift effects. Bryer finds inspiration in daily life and scenes.

"One of the biggest artists that has inspired me is Egon Schiele," Bryer said of the early 20th century Austrian painter. Schiele's work expanded beyond painting to include propaganda drawings during World War I. Bryer stumbled upon this artist's museum in Český Krumlov in the Czech Republic while visiting a friend in 2005.

"Schiele was a figurative illustrator and did these amazing figurative paintings that look almost like they were inspired by Aeon Flux," Bryer said. "When I went to his gallery, that was one thing that really pushed me in the direction of that creativity and being inspired by these artists."

