

'James Surls walking in the door with a chainsaw'

The thrilling, messy history of Houston art in the '70s

By Pete Gershon

In the mid-'70s, the University of Houston was home to a collection of returning Vietnam vets, deferment recipients and kids who narrowly missed the threat of service.

Jim Hatchett was an art student who'd fought in the war and enrolled on the GI Bill upon returning to the States. He was only marginally satisfied with the sculpture classes he took there, one led by an elderly academic assigning countless formal exercises, another by a younger technician lecturing endlessly on the finer points of aluminum casting.

"I only had to endure a couple of semesters of that," Hatchett remembers, "before we all looked up one day to find James Surls walking in the door with a chainsaw."

With his ponytail, droopy mustache and burly physique, Surls looked like some kind of East Texas lumberjack, which wasn't too far from the truth. Inspired by the natural landscape of the Southwest, Surls took massive logs of oak, pine and fir, and chopped them into expressive, rough-hewn figures that evoked a kind of tribal imagery.

After a few years of teaching and sculpting in Dallas, he'd been given a solo show at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 1975, and a year later his close friend John Alexander recommended him for a position at UH.

When the massive oak tree that shaded the Fine Arts Building was felled by lightning a few weeks after his arrival, Surls amazed his students by attacking it with his chainsaw and transforming it into the image of a snarling dog.

"He was a shaman," Hatchett marvels. "He had

hair down to his waist, but he never wore it like that; it was always up in a bun. He had earrings made out of animal teeth, and he was wielding a chainsaw, for chrissakes! We got to watch him build large pieces right there in the bay of the art barn, and we got a lot of gigs as students that we never would have got if people hadn't come out to see what was going on with him."

In the 1970s, Houston was in the midst of an oil boom that flooded the city with money while the rest of the country sank into recession and malaise. Its population grew, as did the height of its skyline. Regular moon launches directed from the nearby NASA headquarters indicated that Houston was a place where anything was possible.

Not much attention was paid to the city's artists, but the construction of a modern steel parallelogram to house its Contemporary Arts Museum, as well as a multimillion-dollar face-lift for the neighboring Museum of Fine Arts, Houston suggested that the visual arts would play an increasingly important role in shaping the city's future.

When the university's art building burned to the ground in 1979, the painting and sculpture departments were moved to a warehouse in the East End. The so-called Lawndale Annex provided a mostly unsupervised space in which a new generation of artists made and displayed work; Surls acted as its self-appointed, benevolent director who led by example and said "yes" to everything.

Lawndale shone brightly as Houston's preeminent alternative art space, but by 1982 Surls was burned out and resigned from the faculty. He continued to grow his

art, however, and today he is hailed as one of the most important and widely collected artists ever to have emerged from the state of Texas.

Other artists haven't been as lucky. One recently stared at me with a look bordering on panic and said, "I'm 74 years old, I'm in bad health, and I have 40 years of paintings in my studio. What's going to happen to them?"

This man, one of the most talented Houston painters of his generation, with works in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, had a point. Who will care for the legacy of a pioneering generation of Houston artists in the decades to come? Who will look after our own?

Houston's creative economy contributes to the quality of life of its citizens and generates billions of dollars annually, attracting employers, employees and tourists to the city. Somehow, however, its own resident artists have never enjoyed the kind of national and international fame that their contemporaries in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles have. Usually, they aren't even particularly well-known here at home. To truly become a destination city for the arts, Houston must preserve and understand its own art history.

Five years ago, I became inspired to capture the stories of the artists, administrators and patrons who transformed the city's art scene during a period of unprecedented growth, risk and opportunity. My research took me from cluttered artists' studios to stately mansion parlors; from noisy Montrose coffee shops to sleek office-tower conference rooms; from the bustling streets of lower Manhattan to the

airy mountain passes of Colorado.

The dust of 40 years had dulled and distorted some memories. Other sources recalled incidents as though they had happened yesterday. All my sources agreed that something special had happened in Houston during those boom years and that the true story had not yet been fully recorded. They said the same thing again and again, in nearly the same words: "What you are doing is important." And for my part, collecting these stories became almost addictive.

I'm not a conventional art historian. I don't really care about art theory, and I'm not an art critic. I'm a journalist with an interest in creative people and a desire to understand the paths they've taken in life. I'm also fascinated by my adopted city and its messy history. How did Houston influence the lives of its artists, and how did these artists influence life in this city? How did they challenge and support one another? Who threw the first punch, do you remember?

These tales and a trove of rare and nearly forgotten images have become a full-fledged book, titled "Collision: Contemporary Artists Working in Houston, 1972-1985," to be published next fall by Texas A&M University Press. The book is almost complete, but the work itself never will be, despite a variety of parallel projects to document the lives and work of Houston artists active during the second half of the 20th century. There is simply too much valuable information still to be collected, preserved and shared.

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