

**On the cover:**

As photographer Katya Horner styled this month's cover shoot with Mother-DogStudios' John Runnels and Charlie Jean Sartwelle she ruminated on the twist – an artist taking a picture of artists in front of their art. While we agree that it's a pretty cool concept, we just love their take on American Gothic – Houston style. Read more about Runnels, Sartwelle and their unique take on life on **page 16**.



Runnels remembers the early years with a touch of nostalgia. "Nobody wanted this neighborhood. It was considered a Mad Max wasteland. The only people here were police, transients and lost people," Runnels remembers. "It was a no-man's land. The police told Charlie Jean not to leave the building without a sawed-off shotgun." That said, the place proved perfect for Runnels and Sartwelle and the first cadre of artists that moved in with them. Artists need a lot of space for little money. At first, the couple heavily scrutinized the tenants for artistic merit. These days they are more interested in artists who obey the rules, which include no pets, no smoking, no moving in and no music. (Headphones are OK.) "We run a tight ship," Runnels grins. "This isn't grad school." Turnover in the 16 generously-sized studios has been relatively low, with some artists, like Jo Ann Fleischhauer, in her 16<sup>th</sup> year. "I instantly fell in love with the atmosphere there," says Fleischhauer, who develops large-scale pieces like the *Parasol Project* there. "It's been an intellectually positive space and a great physical space. MotherDog is my art home and art family."

MotherDog provides a serious place to work at affordable rent and few luxuries other than the occasional stimulation of other artists. The words, "sacred, secret, seizure, silence, solitude and sanctuary," line the stairs leading into the cavernous space. "MotherDog is basically like a library. It's a quiet place where like-minded people come and go," says Sartwelle as she prepares for an April one-person show at The Cloister Gallery at Christ Church Cathedral. "It's built like an old ship," Runnels adds, pointing to the elegantly tar-stained rafters. "Plus, we actually have weather inside the building. We call it natural air."

MotherDog arrived at its name through a glib comment by a befuddled reporter. Runnels and Sartwelle collaborated in 1986 on *Mantraps: Tales of Fornication*, a performance work at Lawndale Art Annex. Runnels trapped himself, sans clothes, inside a constructed black bathroom with tiny peepholes. Eric Gerber of The Houston Post wrote, "Art should try to capture life, but mother dog, nobody ever said anything about holding it prisoner in a big black box afterwards, did they?" On the lookout for a handle, Gerber accidentally gave Runnels a fitting one. The couple promptly quit the performance art biz and began the MotherDog mission of making way for other artists.

The Art Crawl, managed by Runnels and Sartwelle for most of its 16 years, most exemplifies the MotherDog spirit of reaching out to both the public and other artists. Over the years thousands have traipsed through the downtown studios. "The Art Crawl is a gift," says Runnels with noted pride. "People get to see firsthand where art is made." In the past, Runnels partnered with Metro, which

provided trolleys to easily move the masses from studio to studio. This year the crawl faces some serious transportation challenges. "Metro has since sold the trolleys and the large buses can't make the sharp turns," says Runnels. "It will be different this year as studios take a larger role in publicizing their own events."

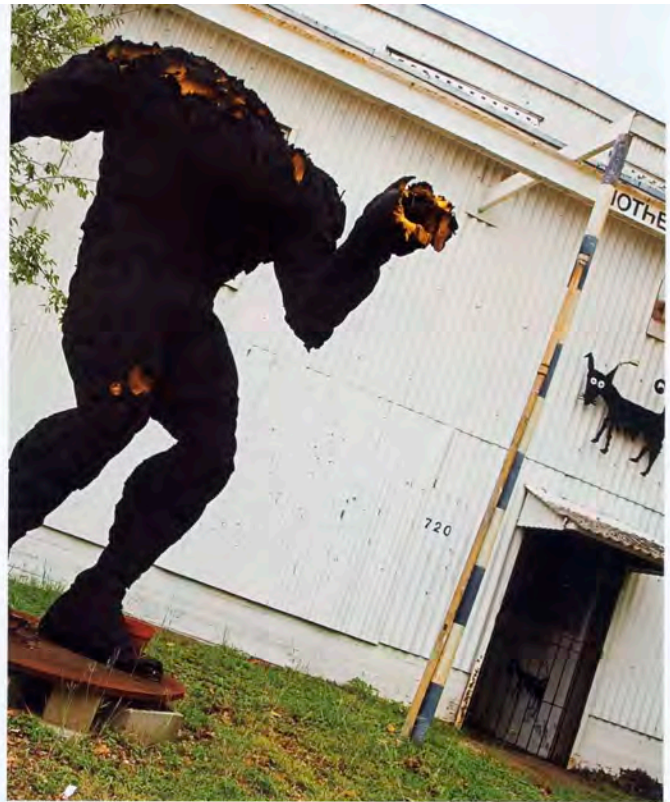
Over the years the landscape has shifted as artists have come and gone, and the lofts just keep on coming. "Lofts to the right of me, lofts to the left of me," groans Runnels. "Money talks and artists walk." There are still plenty of guns around, but they belong to the

**The 16th annual Artists Warehouse ArtCrawl**

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MotherDogStudios provides a serious place for artists to work.

Metro Police, whose shiny new headquarters sits down the street. Polished sidewalks line the streets complete with pristine starter trees. The character of the area has shifted into gentrification mode with MotherDog's rough-hewn look standing in sharp contrast to the sleek, albeit sterile, residential dwellings.

During his time with DiverseWorks between 1983 and 1995 Michael Peranteau witnessed the entrance of regular people and the exit of artists from downtown. "It was a ghost town then," says Peranteau, who now serves as the Society for the Performing Arts' Director of Development. "Warren's and La Carafe were about the only places to go, but with that deadness came cheap places for artists to live and work." Peranteau also observes the upside of residential development. "It's great to have people living here, all of that feels good. On any given night the place is jumping," says Peranteau. "But I would like to see more affordable downtown housing for artists."

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hen DiverseWorks moved from its 214 Travis Street location in 1989 to their present East Freeway address, they were glad to have MotherDog as established neighbors "You can actually

walk there, right under the freeway," says Runnels. "To have such a prestigious alternative arts organization like DiverseWorks move here was a major injection artistically." Diane Barber, DiverseWorks co-director, remembers the buzz when they started Downtown Stomp Around in 2002. "The dock is our front porch; it's a very social space," Barber says. "FotoFest and Frank White have always been great neighbors, but frankly we miss that particular energy we had back in the 1990s." Barber believes a confluence of factors such as better spaces and prices contributed to artist exodus.

Choreographer Sarah Irwin remembers that atmosphere well.

“My studio shared a wall with DiverseWorks,” recalls Irwin from her home in the Hill Country of southwest Austin. Irwin created her compelling piece, *Rooms*, in 1992, a dance that took place in her own studio and DiverseWorks stage simultaneously via a live camera. The piece exposed the potency of shared spaces through humor and Irwin’s envelope-pushing movement vocabulary. During her decade as DiverseWorks’ next door neighbor, she assumed many roles, from organizing local dancers to perform in visiting shows, to pitching in as ticket taker when necessary. When a visiting artist needed an extra body, Irwin was often that body. “I played death as a boa constrictor for Pauline Oliveros,” recalls the choreographer. “I became the link to the dance community.” Irwin’s stature as a downtown artist goes back even farther, with several performances at DiverseWorks’ original 214 Travis Street location and Mel Chin’s and William Steen’s Studio One. Irwin and her collaborator Edie Scott worked with the late James Bettison, Don Redman, and Beth Secor. “There were all these amazing visual artists working there at the time like Jack Massing and Michael Galbraith, before they had become The Art Guys, Sharon Kopriva, and Chuck Dugan, and then there was me. I was just so honored to be included.”

Peranteau credits Irwin, DiverseWorks, MotherDog and others as spearheading a golden age of downtown arts activity. Coming and going are part and parcel of any artist’s life. His own life has moved full circle as he sees once-emerging artists presented at DiverseWorks on the SPA stage. Sixto Wagan, the present co-director of

DiverseWorks, agrees it’s a good thing when artists he nurtured go on to larger venues such as Wortham Theater Center and Hobby Center for the Performing Arts. “It’s important to remember that artists and arts organizations have cycles,” Wagan states. Today, denizens of the dock seem on the comeback trail. Recently, Gabriela Trzebinski and Hanna Hillerova moved in. Currently, DiverseWorks is open for yet another move, possibly to a more accessible area. As for the loft population, Barber holds out hope that they could become DiverseWorks’ next audience.

Early on Runnels and Sartwelle considered becoming a non-profit like DiverseWorks. Their motto, “How small can we stay and still accomplish our vision?” guided the MotherDog mission. “We were afraid we would lose control. We always wanted it to be a democratic dictatorship,” jokes Sartwelle. “We didn’t want to grow bigger either.” The pair got their chance to try the non-profit route during their 10-year tenure as directors of the Bayou Bend ArtPark from 1993-2003. “That experience prepared us for the work we are doing now in public art,” says Sartwelle. After a decade they were ready to move on and allow others to take the helm.

Being adaptable ranks high on any artists’ survival list and Hurricane Ike provided yet another chance to be tested. Runnels

inspects the damage with a mixture of amazement and regret. A leak wreaked havoc on the computers while a horizontal torrent of rain crashed in on his plans for *WATER.WALL*, a public art project slated for 2009 in Phoenix, Arizona. “A trickle down theory took place. It’s



*Dream.boats* is an ongoing collaboration between artist John Runnels and the Buffalo Bayou Partnership.

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TOP: The Parasol Project by MotherDog resident Jo Ann Fleischhauer bloomed on the former home of Blanche Foley in late 2006 and early 2007. ABOVE: Buffalo Bayou Partnership's Nights on Blue Bayou created an enchanting evening of vision and sound.

really quite beautiful how the water bled some of these colors," observes Runnels. Tropical Storm Allison left the couple trapped inside the studio for two days. "The place looked like Venice," reflects Runnels.

For Runnels, the bayou may just be the link that connects the neighborhoods separated by highways. "The Bayou is geomorphologically a river," Runnels insists. "On a quiet day I can even hear the bayou from MotherDog." Water, a frequent subject for the artist, forms the basis of *dream.boats*, his ongoing collaboration with the Buffalo Bayou Partnership. "When you see the sight of silver boats on high your imagination demands the other half," says Runnels about his gleaming upside down stainless steel vessels. "They trigger a portal entrance to a potential experience. For me it was about bringing the qualities of the water up to the street level." Anne Olson, director of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, sees *dream.boats* as a prime example of integrated art and remains dedicated to incorporating public art into all of the organization's projects. Massive pillars created by architects TeamHou and artist Mel Chin gracing Sesquicentennial Park stand as a prime example. Olson is particularly proud of *Nights on Blue Bayou*, a collaboration with the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts that placed music and visual arts events in direct contact with the pedestrian public. "We have made a commitment to innovative events," says Olson. "We want to think beyond beer blasts and rock concerts."

MotherDogStudios, DiverseWorks, and the Buffalo Bayou Partnership join in a mission to find sustainable ways to boost

the city's vibrant downtown art scene. Negotiating the territory with careful attention will determine the future cultural ecology. It's no wonder that Runnels' object of choice takes the form of a boat. As Runnels finishes his final *dream.boats* in the upcoming months, he contemplates the city's evolving landscape. As for the loft dwellers, Runnels remains unconvinced of their contribution and he wishes they would clean up after their dogs more. Runnels and Sartwelle soldier on despite an uncertain future with a gratefulness for the space MotherDog afforded them and the many artists who created under their welcoming

umbrella. They accept their tenuous situation like true urban pioneers. "As artists we adjust. You can't fight the future. We are lucky our space was never considered loft-worthy," admits Sartwelle. "Still, we are always sitting on tender hooks. But then again, I never thought we would be here this long."

DiverseWorks is now considering another move, while Runnels and Sartwelle take the "last man standing" approach, holding out amidst flux. Their stewardship speaks to the artists' unbending resourceful spirit. "Change is inevitable and I embrace it," Runnels ruminates. "The moment we landed here we knew our fate was determined. Our mere presence was the green flag for gentrification. We followed in a long line of artist citizens who ready the ground for the next inhabitants." Runnels ends the tour of his homestead with a visit to his favorite end-of-the-day spot, where mama and papa dog often enjoy a late afternoon cocktail. In the distance looms a stunning view of the shining city rising out of a dusky glow they both still proudly call home. 📍