



Bill FitzGibbons, San Antonio's Social Sculptor

Posted on November 9th, 2013

A fixture in the San Antonio art scene and picture of success, Bill FitzGibbons demonstrates that it is possible to have a flourishing career as an artist in the city.

With more than 30 public art projects under his belt while working full-time as executive director of Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum for 11 years, FitzGibbons recently stepped down to pursue his art full time while maintaining a connection to Blue Star as part-time director of special projects.

FitzGibbons is known internationally for his colorful light installations. Locally, he has illuminated underpasses, building facades and even the Alamo.



FitzGibbons's impressive studio is located in the burgeoning arts district on South Flores Street at Lone Star Boulevard. The large warehouse, once an automotive parts business, is now a space that would make any artist swoon.

This month, the FitzGibbon's studio is filled with blank canvases prepped and primed for his latest project. He's working on a series of "fire drawings," minimalist circular forms made by fire using an oxy-acetylene torch instead of a pencil. Two studio dogs, Scheffield and Lone Star, make the space welcoming.

“One thing you’ll notice about sculptors is that they have an affair with tools,” he said as we made our way through the chambers of his studio.

We passed multiple drafting tables, supplies, periodicals, a makeshift mini-bar, a scale model of a potential public art commission in Iceland and an impressive collection of meticulously organized tools.

FitzGibbons has been at his current space, Lone Star Studios, for nearly eight years. His first studio in San Antonio was at Hot Sauce Studios, the former Pace Picante factory owned by Linda Pace’s mother who lent the space to faculty at the San Antonio Art Institute.



Linda Pace went on to found Artpace, the contemporary artist residency program in downtown San Antonio. When Pace said that she wanted to start an art foundation for artists, FitzGibbons encouraged her to found a residency program that would bring together national, international and local artists.

“I told her, when artists get to know each other, that’s when magic happens,” FitzGibbons said. Hence, Artpace.

Working at the San Antonio Art Institute and later as executive director of Blue Star, FitzGibbons experienced firsthand the growth of the San Antonio art scene and the city’s cultural appeal in general.



“There’s been a tremendous amount of change since 1988 when my wife and I got here,” he said.

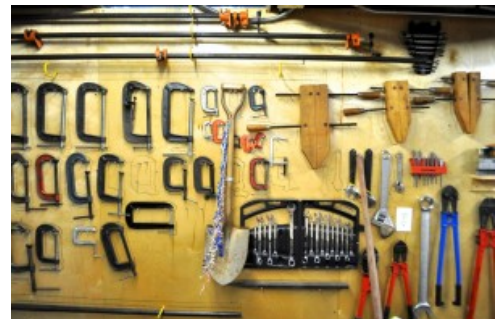
When FitzGibbons first moved to San Antonio there was no public art program, major institutions were not showing local artists and there were few galleries.

“(Mayor Julián Castro) and the previous mayor (Phil Hardberger) have brought tremendous vision and leadership, not only for the city of San Antonio, but for the culture and the visual and performing arts in this

city,” he said.

The development of Artpace and the Southwest School of Art, along with additions to The McNay and the San Antonio Museum of Art, reflect the growing local art scene. Blue Star began as an artist-run studio and gallery space and is now a thriving mixed-use complex.

“It’s really remarkable how many positive things have happened ... everything from respecting historical structures to creative innovative programs,” he said. “Whether it’s B-cycle, the Mission Reach, Museum Reach or investing in downtown, it’s really a very progressive city to live in America.”



That progress hasn't come without community dedication. There was no single event or entity that put San Antonio on the national level in terms of visual arts, but Bill was there for many of them.

He recalled when many of the local arts organizations – including the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center, The McNay, Artpace and SAMA – combined forces with the then-San Antonio Department of Cultural Affairs to draw editors and writers from national art publications to come here for the Writers and Artists Exchange (WAX).



The inaugural event in 2003 focused on visual arts, something that FitzGibbons said helped put San Antonio on the national level for the medium. In 2005, organizers focused on public art.

As director of Blue Star, FitzGibbons enjoyed watching young people visit the bustling gallery on First Fridays.

“The traffic's too dangerous (in Southtown),” Express-News Columnist Roy Bragg wrote. Admittedly, traffic can be rough during some downtown festivals and events – like the First

Friday scene captured here. Usually, traffic is slow and mild down South Alamo Street. Photo by Iris Dimmick.

“They look at every piece and have discussions about it,” said FitzGibbons. “These kids aren't that knowledgeable about contemporary art, but they're having a visceral reaction to what they're looking at. To me, to have an artwork that's out in the public realm and it gets constant exposure by these people who don't normally go to museums or galleries is what art is really about. It's about the personal connection between the artist and the person that's experiencing the art.”



FitzGibbons is a great model for emerging artists, balancing a career as an arts administrator and artist. Often an artist's day job can consume their ability to be in the studio.

FitzGibbons taught art classes and worked with sculpture programs early in his program, which helped support his artistic practice. His advice for emerging artists is to choose the best environment that will support the visual arts: Find a city that has art collectors, art centers and an exciting art community.

“San Antonio has a great visual artist community that is fairly mutually supportive – unlike other cities,” FitzGibbons said.



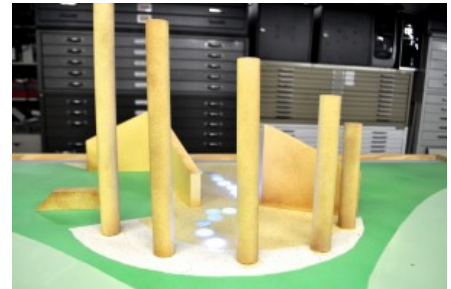
FitzGibbons feels that “Houston and San Antonio are the two top cities, not in terms of commercial art, but in the quality of artists and the number of artists.”

San Antonio’s affordability and stock of near-downtown spaces has enabled FitzGibbons to have a large studio, which allows him to produce larger-scale works of art.

“The size of your studio affects the size of your art,” he said. “The possibility of having a large studio can be realized a lot easier because of San Antonio’s low cost of living.

“San Antonio’s easy to get around, it offers just about everything that you need from a large metropolitan area, from the symphony, to the museums, the restaurants, and it’s very pedestrian-friendly city center,” he said. “It’s just one of my favorite cities in the United States. The only other places I’d probably like to live are San Francisco, New York or Chicago, but you have to be a freakin’ millionaire to properly live there.”

One strength of San Antonio’s art scene is the multitude of artist-run spaces in the Lone Star Art District, like the burgeoning community of studios and galleries on South Flores at Lone Star Boulevard, which hosts a monthly Second Saturday event similar to it’s popular predecessor, First Friday.



First Friday began as a relatively small event that attracted mostly artists and creative types. With festival-like crowds dominating First Friday now, there is an alternative event that appeals more to local and emerging artists. “Second Saturday is like what First Friday was originally,” FitzGibbons said.

Andy Benavides, along with painter Alberto Mijangos, were some of the first artists to purchase property in the area to establish 1906 Gallery, a warehouse that includes studio and gallery space. Around the same time, Joe Lopez bought Gallista Gallery and they soon began having openings on Second Saturday. FitzGibbons’ son, who was working as his studio assistant at the time, also asked to host local bands at the event. Later Alex and Annie Comminos came in and created Comminos Studio. The Comminoses since have moved on to create a new residency program.



More recently, The Lullwood Group moved in, an artist collective consisting of about 10 members with studio art degrees from UTSA. The artists asked to take over exhibitions at Second Saturday and also have studio space at 1906 Gallery. FitzGibbons said they have to put the show up Friday afternoon and take it down by Saturday night.

“I figured they wouldn’t do it, but they’ve been doing it for over a year,” he said of the young artists.

The Lullwood Group has since had other notable shows, like the one at Luminaria, and currently has an installation on Houston Street as part of “X Marks the Art,” a program of Public Art San Antonio.

During the late 1980s, FitzGibbons moved from Alaska to San Antonio, leaving his job as head of the sculpture program at the Visual Arts Center in Alaska to accept the same position at the then-San Antonio Art Institute. He taught numerous courses, as well as a community sculpture class in which Linda Pace was a student. FitzGibbons taught her welding and woodworking.

“She was really afraid of welding at first, the physicality of it. But by the time she got out of my class she was doing six or seven foot welded pieces of sculpture,” he said.

When asked which artists he finds inspiring, Fitzgibbons was quick to name Joseph Beuys. Beuys created what he called social sculpture, believing that art has the potential to transform culture and society.

“It’s very difficult trying to run a full-time sculpture practice while serving as director of an arts organization,” FitzGibbons said. One of the ways he was able to do it was to always consider Blue Star in terms of Joseph Beuys’s expanded concepts of art.

“I viewed Blue Star as social sculpture and a way to engage the community with artists to bring art out from the walls of Blue Star to the grounds of the Botanical Gardens, to UTSA, to St. Paul’s Square, to really engage with the community and collaborate as much as possible with other institutions,” he said.



FitzGibbons does not believe in dumbing down works of art.

“I strongly feel that anybody in the general public, whether it’s a brick layer or a guy delivering lumber, can get an aesthetic response from some of the most sophisticated artwork,” said FitzGibbons. “I’ve experienced that time and time again.”

In undergraduate school, FitzGibbons actually began as a painter. A friend of his brought him to a neon light shop where he was given some surplus units.

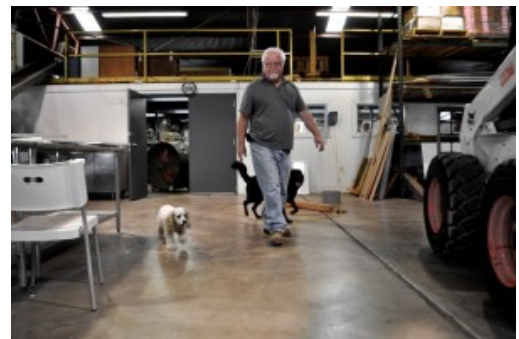
FitzGibbons didn’t create a public art piece with neon until he moved to Alaska.

There are some frustrating things about working with neon. The electricity source is limiting, there is only a selection of 30 or 40 colors, and the neon bulbs are highly breakable, which means they’re not good for public works of art with high exposure.

As he said, “you can’t put neon under an overpass.”

On the other hand, when working with light-emitting diode, or LED, fixtures, there are millions of color possibilities created from a combination of red, green and blue units. A computer tells the LEDs how much of each color to project, and the colors can move and transition at different speeds, creating various effects from a fade to a sparkle.

“With LED you are only limited by your imagination,” FitzGibbons said.



The very first LED piece FitzGibbons created was commissioned by the City of Houston for the Bush Intercontinental Airport, titled “Skywall” (pictured above), though he’s most fond of some of

the light installations he's done in highway underpasses. One of his most recent works, "Light Rails," opened in Birmingham, Ala. this summer. The now vibrantly-lit, art deco-style site used to be a haven for vagrants.



"It's interesting because it's not like a capital building or important public site," said FitzGibbons. "It's an underpass where vagrants urinated. And to take something like that and install a site-specific light sculpture, making it a transformative, place-making object in an urban environment, to me is magical. Pedestrians wouldn't go from the city center to Railroad Park (in Birmingham) because of these issues with vagrancy. So now with 'Light Rails' installed, not only are people not afraid to pass through, but they go there just to see the piece. That single artwork has totally transitioned that whole issue of going through the underpass."

Using two underpasses at Commerce and Houston Streets, "Light Channels" illuminates a visual barrier between San Antonio's Convention Center and a shopping center that had minimal foot traffic. Light Channels encourages visitors to cross under the highway, through the barrier, opening a new flow of customers. This project was a collaboration between the City of San Antonio, the County Government, TX DOT, a downtown business association, and artist Bill FitzGibbons.



Using two underpasses at Commerce and Houston streets, "Light Channels" illuminates a visual barrier between San Antonio's Convention Center and a shopping center that had minimal foot traffic. This project was a collaboration between the City of San Antonio, the County Government, TX DOT, a downtown business association and artist Bill FitzGibbons. Courtesy photo.

There are two LED underpass works by FitzGibbons in San Antonio titled "Light Channels," located at Commerce and Houston streets, connecting downtown to the Eastside. The works enliven traditionally unsightly and repellent highway underpasses that connect roadways and provide cheerful walkability.



You can also see FitzGibbons's light installation, "San Antonio Colorline," on the facade of the University Health Clinic off I-35S and Interstate 10. Reflecting the spirit of San Antonio, its vibrant colors slowly change from one eye-catching hue to the next. As a social sculptor, Fitzgibbons's work contributes to the success of San Antonio's "decade of downtown," making it a more safe and beautiful, pedestrian-friendly place.

FitzGibbons also gained local and national attention for transforming his own home into a work of public art titled "Casa Spectrum." He was especially touched by a gesture from neighbors who, after reading a feature on the piece in a

recent Wall Street Journal article, had a key lime pie delivered to his San Antonio address with a note that read simply: “Thanks for the lights.”

“What is so meaningful about art is touching another person and having them get that ‘aha’ effect, that which is unexplainable,” he said.

When searching for that effect during Second Saturday later today, be sure to say “hi” to Sheffield, Lone Star and Bill.

