CULTURE CANDY'S WWW.CULTURECANDY.ORG JANUARY 2008

SWEET TOOTH

Graphic Design: Paper Slivine

CROSSING THE STREET

I LOVE TELLING new arrivals about my first weekend in Baton Rouge when I stood for two long days in the middle of a small field surrounded by aging homes—the right place at the right time—and listened to an unending string of bands pound the heat back out of the day. In Baton Rouge, people rely on a wonderfully enigmatic transfer of knowledge about where to be and when, a game almost of fighting to fit into the ebb of our bourgeoning arts world. But some people in Baton Rouge want to begin a new habit, a habit that would breathe life into a rather arcane vision of what is possible. We have decided to use a calendar. Or two. Or five.

Both BRevents and RougePages, open forums for posting your events online, were created with the best intentions. Both sites remain largely unused. 'Clarence's Baton Rouge Information Page' while packed with information is cumbersome. Print journals like Country Roads and 225 Magazine (among others) offer—by design—a predetermined and therefore still limited listing of local events. One of my favorite BR inventions, the e-newsletter Cherry, works concertedly to 'fight homogeneity,' a worthy if not yet fully-realized goal. No doubt, the calendar bug has bitten. So why aren't we using these calendars better? More importantly, what does it say about how Baton Rouge residents communicate with each other? Or how they don't?

My friend Donney is an events planner as well as a phenomenal poet. Donney knows how important calendars are. 'Look at Chelsea's,' he tells me. 'The first thing you see when you go into Chelsea's is the calendar. On the first, Dave has to figure out how to fill the entire month up. In other words, he's telling everyone that comes in, 'You'll always have something to do here.''

I ask Donney if he's ever used CultureCandy.org, the online events calendar for cool, cultural things going on in Baton Rouge, to advertise one of his events. 'Nope,' he answers. Suddenly I hear myself saying Baton Rouge and I realize that the picture I see is LSU, the lakes, downtown, Government Street, and a wall of misinformation and unknowns stretching north from Florida Blvd. I ask Donney if he's ever used KontinousEvents.com. 'Yeah, sure,' Donney pauses. 'Kontinuous is, well, I guess like the black events bulletin in Baton Rouge.' Right. That makes sense. Why wouldn't there be an events calendar that appeals to north Baton Rouge?

About a year ago, the Arts Council of Baton Rouge started importing the CultureCandy.org calendar to their main website. Don't get me wrong. I'm a fan of collaboration. But does the collaboration end here? Alliances are made—end of conversation? 'The thing is,' Donney says, 'there aren't really that many 'arts' events on Kontinuous.' No? So, what exactly are we calling 'the arts'? I ask if there is music or dance at any of the events on Kontinuous. Donney nods in agreement and reminds me that his own poetry open mic is advertised on the site.

Across the city, we are still not sharing knowledge as much as we could be. From a bouquet of online and print, community and business-driven, grassroots events calendars that do not communicate with each other comes the increased fragmentation of an already fragmented city. At what point do we have a conversation about all of these calendars, niche or no, and how they do or don't point to each other—a true collaborative effort that is held together by a shared vision to promote awareness of cultural events in our city?

My boss-lady, Anna West, says that the best remedy for stagnation is to cross the street. 'Go where you haven't gone before. Dare to visit the other side. Of course, you can't do that unless you are willing to be uncomfortable, to grow a little bit, and to challenge your own assumptions about where you're supposed to be.' That first year in Baton Rouge, I found a Dairy Queen in the phone book and drove straight up Plank Rd. all the way to Central for an Oreo Blizzard. It was four years before I made it out to a bar on Scenic Highway. Today, still woefully ignorant about north Baton Rouge, I recognize that if I want to change the current landscape, I must recommit myself ever day to write, ask, shout, plead for more sharing, more communication, more opportunities to cross the street, to vote with my feet and my dollars and my words and my willingness to look into the heart of a new thing, a thing that says, Hell no, you're not alone—you're surrounded by the grace of difference. Have I come full circle? Perhaps. Hopefully. Multiple calendars in hand, I stomp back out into the city and try again to catch the flow of Baton Rouge's many voices as they pound the heat of possibility back into the day.

—Anna Hirsch

SIGNS OF BATON ROUGE

VENI HARLAN is a Baton Rouge photographer and graphic designer who knows what she likes. And what she likes is the hand painted commercial signage of Baton Rouge. She even knows exactly when and where her passion began. In the fall of 2003 she was traveling with her first digital camera, 'a little Pentax' and her eye was caught by the light of the setting sun on the corrugated tin door of Dolphin's Tire Shop on North Street. Now she has a website, www.signsofbatonrouge.com. As she remembers in the introduction to the site, 'I shot a photograph of the old building with its no nonsense block type and simple tire illustration. It had a native beauty and in that moment I began to look at signage in a different way.'

After just one visit to her site, where you can see scores of these colorful, startling hand-painted signs, will probably look at these signs in a different way too. (I recommend the 'slide show' which displays Veni's photographs at a nice scale, with helpful captions.) Veni's website features a map which shows the area within which these pictures were taken. It is bounded by Airline Highway to the north, Scenic Highway and River Road to the west, and a diagonal line that runs roughly from Greenwell Springs Road across to West McKinley Street, just south of the I-10 bridge.

Some knowledge of the history of this area is crucial to an appreciation of its signs. The commercial and residential areas nearest the river began to decline in the late 1960s. Spurred by integration, the primarily white, blue collar, residents moved with the city's sprawl. In the wake of this 'white flight,' urban decay, crime, and infrastructure issues ensued. Today, the area is primarily comprised of black residents and business owners. Neighborhoods like Magnolia Terrace and Eden Park are long-standing black residential communities dotted with locally owned enterprises like corner stores to barber shops.

The oldest signs are the neat but fading hand-painted signs from a bygone era, the early and middle twentieth century, when sign lettering was taught in professional academies and was the dominant form of signage across the United States. This style of painted sign is almost completely extinct now, replaced by computer rendered vinyl signs and digitally printed full-color and photographic billboards. Think slick and impersonal. Generally speaking, the human touch has gone out of signage.

But not in Baton Rouge. The economic and human necessities of this part of town have prevented the vinyl signage industry from taking over. Instead, Baton Rouge is the home of a number of sign-painting artists who still find opportunities to ply their craft. Alvin Penn was inspired to paint by his Capital High art teacher, Ms. Young, before apprenticing with experienced painters. Eddie Gray finds regular work by referral. Wayne Jones, a prolific mural painter, 'peddles the city with cans of paint dangling from his handle bars,' as Veni puts it. And Don Taylor painted the fine work that brightens the Buddy Stewart Foundation Building in Eden Park.

Ultimately Veni would like to document not just the signs of Baton Rouge, but the people behind the signs, the enterprising and innovative sign painters of Baton Rouge, who make our community a vibrant and human one. Veni has brought

Photo: Veni Harlan

her research with her to the LSU School of Art, where she is working towards an MFA in Graphic Design. With the resources at her disposal there, she plans to pursue in even greater depth her study of the signs of Baton Rouge. I think we will hear from her again.

—Paul Dean

A BIGGER PICTURE

AT A RECENT gallery showing, I overheard a patron claim that the best way to make art is to turn things upside down and force the viewer to look at them in new ways. Just shake things up a little and wait for a reaction. Of course, this is not the only way to make art but it sometimes serves as an antidote to all the pretty pictures. The problem with this approach is that it isn't really needed-- our region is undergoing radical change with or without artistic endeavor.

Everywhere we look things are already turned all around. Our city has experienced exponential growth fueled by an unraveling environment. The question is whether landscape artists can keep up with the pace of change.

We have front row seats for one of the greatest spectacles in human history but the scene is blurred. Nobody seems sure what climate change is-what it means to our planet or our region. This is partly because politicians and scientists dominate the discussion and everything happening on spatial and temporal scales that are hard to frame. The loss of Arctic ice, collapse of species and destruction of New Orleans are all linked by what meteorologists call 'teleconnections'. Think of the butterfly effect and you get the idea. But how do you capture that in a photo or painting?

To describe this global metamorphosis as a challenging subject for art is an understatement.

In our region, the handwriting is already on the wall. Rising seas, drought, mosquitoes, killer storms and displaced populations—we're getting it all in Baton Rouge. Recent news reports suggest that we may even be a coastal city by the end of this century as a result of global warming. Why aren't more artists exploring this issue?

Slidell photographer Matthew White isn't afraid of the big picture. He has spent the last few years documenting the changing coast from Texas to Florida. His sweeping landscapes offer a vision of the changing coast that is very different from most of the now-clichéd post-Katrina photography that dominates coffee tables and gallery walls. He captures a sense of solitude and wonder even as he shows the built environment's shaky co-existence with the natural world.

When asked what his photos represent, he says, 'What's at stake is the individual's experience. If the coast is lost, it's a personal loss for everyone.' Unlike news reports on our situation, White's photographs don't tell me what others are thinking or what I should think. They evoke a contemplative mood and invite me to look at things I would otherwise not see. They demand that I think. You can check out his writing and photography at www.matthewwhite.com.

White claims he is doing his job by 'giving people in other

parts of the country a chance to see a region they are probably not familiar with,' but he is doing much more. He is recording and reinventing a quickly unraveling world with no power greater than his art. We need to join him. We need to begin reconstituting our world right here and now. We've got a lot of work to do. —*Steve Babcock*

ANCESTRAL MEMORIES

New Orleans' lyricism and physicality reverberates in Martin Payton's minimal assemblages. ('Spare,' he says). 'That's the only place in the world I ever wanted to live . . . the hurricane changed that.' After most of his life in the city, and many years carrying the modes of NOLA with him, this prominent sculptor/educator now lives in Baton Rouge.

Payton can't pin down a 'Katrina-effect' on his work; however, in the presence of these elegantly joined scraps, original colors quieted, cool with an undercurrent of funk, one senses an artist who has gained a clarity of perspective on 'provincialism,' the city, politics, and history- a clarity one associates with a person on the other side of something.

We sat for an hour at Payton's studio, a former repair shop, and, jazz in the background, discussed a burgeoning Baton Rouge, steel, and the nature of improvisation:

00:06:07. I was very interested in the whole idea of improvisational attacks. Being born and raised in New Orleans, and sort of fed on that music that happened there . . . those were the artists. . . . I had access to.

00:11:54. Baton Rouge is a college town, and I think that that gives it its cosmo, the fact that it has these universities, and now the community college. What I liked most about New Orleans was that it was a small town...a collection of villages, and I've always felt that about Baton Rouge as well. . . . I think there's a vibrant arts scene here in Baton Rouge. There are a number of galleries that show work that I respect.

00:22:48. [The racial divide] is a problem for this country, it has been a problem for this country, and until it is addressed realistically it will continue to be a problem for this country. When you eliminate a large sector of the populace you're also eliminating the resources that are potentially available there. How many people who could have made great contributions, never got to make them because of apartheid bullshit? I don't know how we get past it. Can art play a part in that? Well, yeah, but not just art, I don't think art has some special province about bringing people together . . . but it certainly can happen through art . . . because that's what this language is about: connecting people's life experience.

00:26:25. Being in New Orleans and welding steel, I feel that I'm directly connected to those African craftsmen who were brought there with those skills specifically to apply them in that place. Those wrought iron grills and gates and fences. . . . You can see a stylistic difference from the wrought iron work that the African craftsmen did from the cast-iron work that happened later with the German craftsmen. It goes much farther back. I connect this with 5,000-year-old slag heaps at the base of the Nile, in places like Meroë and Napata, so when I'm using that material I feel like all that stuff is part of it, from that through the twentieth century.

00:28:44. I don't think it's an accident that I'm welding steel. I didn't plan to get there; I had no consciousness of it. . . . Ancestral memory, I think there's something to that . . . certainly those musicians: you can start with Buddy Bolden down in New Orleans and then go on through King Oliver and Louis, and throw Mahalia in there and the whole rest, and up the river to St. Louis and Chicago, all of that was about taking what was available and creating something beautiful with it, and that something beautiful resonated with the values of that person who created it, and of the culture who created that person. All of that is one, all of that is one thing as far as I'm concern —*Martin Payton, interviewed by William G. Osborne III*

SAY SOMETHING

A sculpture, a photograph, a play, a story, a song, a dance, a film or a painting should, at the very least, start a conversation. But I've noticed over the past eight years of living in Baton Rouge that, for some reason, our arts community isn't talking. Discussion is the purpose of art, and that discussion should be expected to occur. I moved here from Lake Charles where I studied photography at McNeese State University. I left behind a small but active arts community where feedback from professors and peers was customary, and was often shared even between artists of different disciplines. Discussion was implicit, and both technical skill and content were emphasized equally. But I have noticed a significant difference with the scene here: that aside from technical issues there is little or no discussion of work and mere mentions of content are practically non-existent. Even art show receptions, which are generally very well-attended, seldom if ever lead to any noteworthy conversation; they exist merely as social events. Occasionally, the work is never even mentioned.

Perhaps no one is talking because there is a lack of meaningful content; the work isn't trying to say anything profound. Perhaps the work isn't supposed to be 'about' anything—it is supposed to exist merely for 'aesthetic' reasons. In an interview with painter Brice Marden in November 2006 regarding his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, he reveals his thoughts about art and the purpose of his work: 'This is a real responsibility—being an artist. You're not just doing this stuff to make pretty things that people hang on their wall, there's some meaning to it. You are living in a culture and you are reflecting on the culture.' Some of Marden's canvases are simply muted monochrome rectangles, likely the most minimal paintings ever made. Yet even the simple form of his work is an extension of its meaningful content; he paints that way for a purpose.

With the abundance of things going on in this region, let alone the rest of the world, work that exists only for itself and does not address relevant issues is mere self-indulgence for the one who creates it. Work that is concept-conscious should be a priority now more than ever. Art is about sharing ideas, and an artist is one who communicates those ideas simply and effectively to readers, listeners or viewers to provoke discussion.

It is up to artists to start conversation. Artists are responsible for providing stimulating, relevant, and thought-provoking work; only then can the community respond. I encourage art-goers to engage artists about the content of their work, so that they are required to achieve some kind of culpability for what they choose to create. I also challenge artists to bring something relevant to public attention that encourages education, enlightenment, and most importantly, discussion.

—*Britt King*

THE STATE OF THE SOUTHERN NOVEL

In his 1978 essay 'Going Back to Georgia,' Walker Percy, examining the South's assimilation into mainstream American culture since the Civil War, readily apparent to him in the election of Jimmy Carter to the presidency (the first Southerner elected to the office since 1848), made this statement about that assimilations effect on Southern literature:

The so-called Southern renascence is over – that is, the remarkable thirty years or so when writers like Faulkner, O'Connor, Welty, Richard Wright and Caldwell traded on the very exoticness, the uniqueness of the Southern phenomenon. It was a rich vein to mine and Faulkner, Warren, O'Connor, Tate-and-company pretty well mined it out. So, the Southern novelist today finds himself in a transition[...] Now he, too, like his fellow novelists in the Western world, is faced with the larger questions about the dilemma [...] of modern urban and suburban man. He can't imitate Faulkner or Welty, or at least he'd better not try.

If we are to concede Percy this point, then how has Southern literature fared in the last thirty years, faced with his maxim? Has the dominant trend of contemporary Southern literature been able to work its way out from under the shadow of those heavy-hitters of our regions literary renaissance and give meaningful insight to the increasingly urban/suburban world that the South, along with the rest of the nation, finds itself in?

Taking note of some laudable exceptions (contemporary urban/suburban Southern novels Rabbit Factory by Larry Brown and Jesus Saves by Darcey Steinke come immediately to mind) I'm afraid that the answer is an emphatic 'no.'Browsing a few bookstores' Southern fiction shelves over the holidays, the notable trend that I found is that most of the works are set in a South somewhere between the 1850's and 1950's, they take place in a rural setting and they continue to adhere largely to the archetypes/stereotypes set forth in the canon of Southern literature by the greats that Percy cites above.

There are two places, I believe, one could lay the blame. One is to place it on the reader of contemporary Southern literature (and by proxy, the publishers, they are just as much customers as readers are). After all, they buy the books, and it doesn't matter if anyone is writing good literature about the South and its peoples' journey from a region of rural agrarianism to urbanized industrialization if it's not saleable. In a national culture that seems to increasingly value entertainment as escapism, the argument could be made that the reader of Southern literature wants to continually re-read the stereotypical Southern novel because it is easily recognizable, familiar and a pleasant diversion. I am not quick to blame the reader of Southern fiction, though, because in my experience, as an employee of an independent bookstore in Mississippi that had a Southern fiction section almost as big as its General/International fiction section, the reader of Southern literature (and we had a number of web-based and mail order clients all over the country, not just in the South) is both very interested in reading good novels about the region and highly suggestible as to what they should be reading. If there are good novels that are willing to dig into the contemporary South for what it is now, and not just those focused on what we have been in the past, I'm convinced those books will be published and read both by those within the region and elsewhere.

The other possible culprit is the Southern novel writer. Could it be that contemporary, urban/suburban Southern life is no longer Southern enough to make for compelling Southern literature? I think such a claim might hit pretty close to home, but it is also the means by which to create meaningful, contemporary Southern fiction. It is that very conflict, of the past versus the present, the rural versus the urban/suburban, the easily recognizable South of old versus the assimilated, contemporary South that has become more and more like 'everywhere else' that should be in the sights of more of our men and women of letters. Walker Percy himself wrote excellent, successful novels using these themes, beginning with his debut, *The Moviegoer*, in 1961 and culminating in the 'suburban thriller' *The Thanatos Syndrome* in 1987.

While our Southern novel writers may join 'his fellow novelists in the Western world' in this exploration, I feel such a literature would be distinctly Southern and provide the means for an engaging dialog about not only where the South has been, but where it is going. Compare Percy's *The Moviegoer*, set in and around New Orleans, to Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, another suburban novel set in Connecticut and published in the same year, and you see how influential Percy's sense of place is compared to Yates', where it seems but a utilitarian backdrop. A strong body of contemporary urban/suburban Southern literature would be, just like the novels of the original Southern literary renaissance, a catalyst in the preservation of what is unique about the South's people and culture. It just might yield some great books to read as well. —*Dave Carner*

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITIES IN ART

I still feel apprehensive calling myself an artist. Since I'm currently in the process of earning my Master of Fine Arts degree, I often just call myself 'student' and only explain further if asked. Perhaps I do this because I am still learning and also because this title is easier for people to understand. I've tried saying 'artist' before, but the conversation always continues with questions like: Are there jobs for that? What do you plan to do after school? So are you planning on teaching? It's not that I'm not proud of what I do – in fact I think it is the best career I could have chosen for myself. These conversations just depress me. I constantly have to defend the career that I have chosen for myself, validate that art majors definitely have a place in the job market, and explain how artists have one of the most challenging and exhilarating careers of all.

What is an artist? Well, in my mind it is a person that dedicates their life to the study, comprehension, and creation of visual art (whether it be 2-D, 3-D, film, sound, or physical movement). A successful artist, in my opinion, is one that can sustain a viable income from their creative work without supplements from outside means (excluding grants and fellowships). This is the ultimate goal of mine, and yet I know it is extremely difficult to reach. I could do everything right in my life, make great work (in my opinion) and earn great shows and reviews, and still never become successful. It is definitely discouraging to know that a part of having an art career depends solely on luck and who you know. I am a hard worker willing to sacrifice a great deal for what I love to do, but in this field, hard work will only get you so far.

I often think about what it means to be an artist, all the work that goes into this career that people just don't think about. Not only do you have to make quality work that people want to see (and believe me, this is pressure enough), but you also have to think about yourself as a small business. You are making a product to be sold – you, in essence, are a company. Suddenly you need to take into account marketing, publicizing, networking, and financing. However, it is this odd combination of expressive freedom and fierce competition that drives many people, including me, to become artists. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do with my life, and it is this passion that is essential to making the career of 'artist' work.

Realistically, I don't think the outside world understands what it takes to be an artist. It is not just a job; it is a life, a relationship, a commitment, a sacrifice. Art has a way of taking over every single aspect of your life: your daily routine, your sleep, how you eat, where you go, how you spend your money, who you talk to, what you think about, what you wear, and even your self identity. It is this all-encompassing quality of art that I thrive off of and love. Art is complex, and part of being an artist is figuring out how to navigate all of these complexities in order to remain sane while doing what you love —creating art work.

'Artist' is not a title I use frequently because I am still sheltered by the academic world (being one of only 50-something graduate art students), and have not yet stepped foot into the harsh reality of the outside world (becoming one of thousands of artists). I think I will embrace the title 'artist' more readily once I try to make my way on my own. I may still teach art or have a related job that supports my art making, and I do not see this as negative or an obstacle to my long-term goal.

Teaching is a wonderful job and is very conducive to sustaining the passion and support needed to make art. Many artists continue teaching even as they gain success, becoming visiting artists at universities, tenured professors, or residency teachers. I believe that teaching and art making compliment each other very well, but a balance needs to occur between these two.

Becoming an artist is more complex than the romantic fantasy I thought it was when I was young: hard work, passion, dedication, intelligence, and creativity (and yes, luck) are all part of the job. I'm scared to death to go out into the world on my own with my degree in hand, but more than that, I am excited because I could go anywhere. I feel privileged to start off in Baton Rouge, Louisiana where a budding art scene, supported whole-heartedly by the community, is growing bigger every year. I know that many young artists like me enjoy the support and encouragement that this city is giving the arts, and it can only get better from here.

Recommended reading: *Art & Fear; Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* by David Bayles & Ted Orland, and *The Practical Handbook for the Emerging Artist* by Margaret R. Lazzari. —*Mallory Feltz*

READ THESE ARTICLES AND RESPOND TO THEM!
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