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Art Guys' DVD box set strolls down memory lane

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Art Guys Jack Massing, left, and Michael Galbreth met as students at the University of Houston.

Michael Galbreth and Jack Massing — the conceptual duo known as the Art Guys — have been fixtures of the Texas art scene for more than 25 years.

Now Microcinema International has released *Home on the Range*, a two-DVD box-set anthology of their work from 1983 to 2008. It includes *Video Works: 1984-2008* and *Nothing to It: The Art Guys in Concert*, a Zenfilm documentary of a 2008 event at the University of Houston — where they met as students — that reprised many of their stage performances since 1983 and introduced a few new ones.

The set should have no trouble satisfying the duo's longtime fans, but it also serves as a nice introduction for those with faint familiarity with their work. Each disc also plays to the strengths of the medium on which it focuses. *Video Works* benefits from editing and delivers charming time capsules from Houston art history — also documenting performances elsewhere — while *Nothing to It* thrives on the Art Guys' chemistry with a live audience.

Video Works is divided into four segments: two devoted to video experiments, which bracket the film; one focusing on experiments in public performances; and a group of stage performances. The early video experiments frequently investigate the musicality of

sounds made by such nonmusical instruments as buckshot pellets, coins and airplanes. Often the results are surprisingly beautiful.

The first section also includes performances related to their Facial Hair for Distant Cities series, like the laugh-out-loud funny — and punny — Go Tee Off (1989), in which the Art Guys grew goatees for a San Diego exhibit and documented themselves teeing off a procession of increasingly bulky and cumbersome objects on a golf course.

The public-performance segment features works you may only have heard about as urban legends. Did the Art Guys really spend 24 hour stretches sitting and dining in a Denny's restaurant and working at a Stop 'n Go for 24 hours for a couple of “behaviors,” as they call performances that aren't so much staged as lived? Yes, and you can catch snippets of both in bemused TV news reports.

There's some overlap between the stage-performance and late-video-works segments and Nothing to It, which UH's Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts presented at the university's Lyndall Finley Wortham Theatre. The final two sections of Video Works are its most uneven, underscoring that, as Contemporary Art Museum Houston senior curator Toby Kamps writes in an essay accompanying the box set, “The Art Guys are inspired as much by dumb, half-baked ideas as they are by revelatory, perspective-changing ones. They also believe that art by definition is experimental, and they are unashamed of their failures.”

There's a fine line between risking failure and courting mediocrity, as some works here do. But with times ranging from 42 seconds to a little over six minutes, none of the videos unduly tries your patience, and Kamps is right that the whole adds up to more than the sum of the parts.

After kicking off with a funny and even touching piece in which the Art Guys apply lipstick and kiss every audience member, Nothing to It has its fits and starts. But it builds up steam each time Galbreth and Massing guzzle a beer in honor of conceptual artist Tom Marioni, whose signature work, The Act of Drinking Beer With Friends Is the Highest Form of Art, is the stuff of art-world legend.

Marioni may be right. I didn't have a drop while watching Nothing to It, but I swear the more beer the Art Guys knocked back — joined by a gradually widening circle of friends — the better the show got.