

# Notsuoh: freedom with just a little supervision

By KRISTIN FINAN Copyright 2007 Houston Chronicle

I had just set foot in the bar when Jack Massing tried to persuade me to be the keeper of his ashes when he dies.

A little forward, don't you think?

Ten minutes later, as he was still talking about the future of his remains without even the slightest hint of a smile, I figured out that this unlikely proposition was part of the latest project by Massing and his partner, Michael Galbreth (together they are the Art Guys), who are making a statement about death and dying by offering to auction their remains to the highest bidder (bidding starts at \$1 million).

We parted ways, and I was left with a feeling that would eventually sum up my night at Notsuoh: I wasn't sure I got it, but I was fascinated.

Described by patrons as "a petri dish for artists," a "Bohemian paradise" and "one of the most important nexuses on the surface of this Earth," Notsuoh — that's Houston spelled backward — has a history of serving as a combined stage, studio, gallery and living room for some of the city's most creative minds.

Located in a historical building on Main, Notsuoh first functioned as a coffee shop from 1996 to 2003.

Last year, owner Jim Pirtle re-opened the space as a bar.

If you've ridden the rail toward UH Downtown, you've likely seen the building. It's the one fronted by a huge neon sign that reads: "The Home of Easy Credit," a phrase that could also be considered Pirtle's unofficial motto.

"This is an incredibly tolerant place, about sexual orientation, economic condition, what job you have, how old you are," Pirtle said. "It's wide open."

In some ways, Notsuoh functions as any other bar. Patrons sip Lone Stars, bartenders receive mundane reminders like, "Please do not leave scoop in ice," and there's always one token obnoxious guy, who, on Wednesday night, looked at me, said, "Quote this," and burped into my notebook, his beer breath brushing my wide-ruled pages.

But the similarities between Notsuoh and an average bar end here. Let's start with décor.

To walk into Notsuoh is to feel immediately overwhelmed by clutter, as if it was decorated by a crazy, old cat lady with a compulsion to horde. Items you're likely to see lying around include newspapers from the '60s and '70s, bound ledger books from the space's previous life as a clothing store, a half-eaten Bundt cake, toilet paper and a Pee-Wee Herman-esque ball of tin foil.

Even more interesting is the clientele, which ranges from grungy, fedora-wearing 20-somethings to 60-something salt-and-pepper academic types. On Wednesday, a lecture gave way to open-mic poetry night, aspiring wordsmiths taking the stage to read scrawled pieces of their thoughts.

"If you feel it, if you like it, it matters," said poet Lyric Osiris. "It is valid."

I had just finished listening to a particularly animated man whose poetry was based on sex and violence when a concerned looking Pirtle tapped my shoulder.

"That didn't ruin it for you, did it?" he asked.

I may have been wearing a Western-style shirt, but this was not my first rodeo.

"My job is to make sure everybody behaves, make sure the environment's safe and that people are having manners," said Pirtle, a former kindergarten teacher. "You set out toys, and you supervise."

Behind him, a girl in an adorable vintage dress named Bailey walked in carrying 10 balloons, each one a different color.

Once open-mic poetry ended, she tied the balloons to the stage and joined her partner, Russell, to form the duo King Stork.

"No one bought me any balloons," she said, explaining that it was her birthday. "So I bought them for myself."

Some things about Notsuoh were still a mystery when I left that night. Were the rumors about it formerly being a speakeasy and a bizarre after-hours hangout actually true? And where was the dog that supposedly wandered around? And how, exactly, do you define a place like this?

What I had figured out, though, was that no matter what you wanted to do — sell your own ashes, bring yourself balloons, get some easy credit or have a beer — you were probably allowed, if not encouraged, to do it at Notsuoh.