

sculpture

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HOUSTON
The Art Guys
McClain Gallery



Above: The Art Guys, *Forever Yours*, 2007-2009. Bronze busts with engraved brass plaques and framed digital archive print, installation view.

The Art Guys, Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth, have worked together since 1984, building their reputation on a staunch commitment to art and ideas over sales and stability. Based in Houston, the duo began their career in a modest loft studio where they mounted alternative exhibitions of other artists and their own work, which often considered of actions and performances unwelcomed within the art establishment.

For “New Clichés,” their first commercial gallery exhibition in 12 years, The Art Guys created objects, video sculpture, and conceptual drawings. Gentle bursts of light drew viewers into the gallery’s white-walled interior, illuminated by reflections from a suspended mirrored chain saw. Plywood signs rested on the floor to the left, and the dividing wall facing the entrance supported eight antique photos in antique frames. Below, a small ledge held a rusty spray pesticide container with a video monitor. On the far left wall, motorized wooden letters spelled out, “Fuck ‘em if they can’t take a joke.”

“If someone stood right here and looked at these works, you could easily convince them that this was a group show,” Galbreth said. “That, for me, is what on the surface is problematic about our work.” Problematic for commercial galleries, that is. The Art Guys can take these risks because they have a dedicated following of collectors as well as a track record of important public art

commissions. But now, they both have families, homes and a few gray hairs. They are looking to increase their revenue and cement their legacy.

These concerns, however ironically handled, inform their most recent and perhaps their last work, *Forever Yours*, which the Art Guys call their “final gesture.” They are selling their future cremated remains for upwards of one million dollars. In the show, a pair of golden bronze busts of The Art Guys sat inside a scarlet-painted room. These traditional forms have a morbid purpose – to house The Art Guys’ cremated remains. An oversized certificate hung on the wall behind the busts, framed in ornate, gold-painted, carved wood, explaining the “agreement” between The Art Guys and the buyer. When asked how their families reacted to losing control over their loved ones’ remains, The Art Guys replied, “We asked our families to accept it and to deal with it. In one way, it’s selfish, in another, they get to benefit from it while we’re alive. It’s reverse life insurance.”

They are also selling their trademarked name, The Art Guys, for a six-figure sum. They will continue to work together under another name. “We start with the premise of the artist as commodity, then, the body as sculpture, and expand it into social sculpture,” Galbreth explains. He admits that he can’t stop thinking about this piece, more than any other they’ve made. And for The Art Guys, that’s worth a million bucks.

-Allison Hunter