

The Art Guys' guise: For their latest project, Houston's gonzo performance artists turn suits into a piece of work

Robert Philpot, The Fort Worth Star Telegram, 1998



HOUSTON - The first thing you notice as you walk into the old textile mill - besides the dearth of air conditioning - is the back wall of the large, high-ceilinged front room. It's adorned with a dozen stenciled suitcases, a word on each, composing Gustave Flaubert's definition of metaphysics: "One has no idea what it is, but one laughs at it." Fitting. One might not have any idea what this building is doing among the early-1900s houses of Houston's historic Heights district, but one can't help but at least smile at it, and what follows: In what amounts to the living room, there's a five-bulb lamp made out of plumbing pipe and old garden-sprinkler cans. Next to the dining-room table stands a 5-foot-tall, bullet-shaped sculpture made from Corona beer bottles, a fraternity-boy tower taken to its logical extreme.

This is just a small part of what you'll find at Art Guys World Headquarters, the home, work space and sometimes gallery of Jack Massing and Michael Galbreth, better-known as the Art Guys, court jesters of the aesthetic kingdom. That they work out of the old mill - which they share with a 12-year-old shepherd mix named Cleo, a cat named Phranque and a project assistant named Kelly "Tigger" Schexnayder - is curiously appropriate, considering that their latest project is called "Suits: Clothes Make the Man."

This time, though, the "gallery" will be the Art Guys' bodies. The suits, designed by

Todd Oldham, feature more than 50 spaces for advertising logos. Massing and Galbreth have spent nearly a year soliciting advertisers to fill the spaces, which cost from \$2,000 to \$7,000.

By the time the Art Guys debut the suits at a parade at 7 p.m. Saturday in Houston, the suits will look like the outfield wall of a minor-league baseball stadium, plastered with logos from Altoids, Target, Krispy Kreme Doughnuts and a host of others. And yes, the parade will consist solely of Massing and Galbreth, who will wear the suits at various gallery openings and public appearances throughout the next year.

Even if the guys weren't premiering the suits on a hot, sticky July day in downtown Houston, the big question would still be: Why?

"We're acquiescing to the fact that you can find advertising anywhere," Massing says while awaiting an order of burritos especiales at a Mexican restaurant near Art Guys World Headquarters. "Not necessarily in a 'giving up' way, but more in a celebration of that."

But then Galbreth interjects - like many duos who work together, the Art Guys aren't always exactly of the same mind (for instance, Galbreth orders tacos al carbon). "I still don't consider it a celebration," he says. "Actually, it's an acknowledgment. . . . I don't see advertising and how it dominates our culture as necessarily good. I don't necessarily see it as bad, either. But I do see it as necessarily there."

Massing's turn: "When I was a kid, I had a jean jacket that I put a lot of patches on, and I thought that was really cool, so I was celebrating the fact that I was collecting these patches," he says. "So it's kind of interesting comparatively to that, and when you think of the NASCAR drivers or the bass fisherman, they're just covered with all that stuff, and it's cool. It's cool to be a bass fisherman and have all those sort of patches on. So I see it as a celebration very much."

This kind of interplay is typical of the Art Guise (not only do they say the spelling is unimportant, Massing says that recent journalistic attempts at consistency are "kind of irritating"). Their mix of creativity and whimsy inspires comparisons to other offbeat duos such as gonzo magicians Penn & Teller or South Park creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, probably with a bit of quirky filmmakers the Coen Brothers thrown in.

Massing, 39, and Galbreth, 42, began working together as students at the University of Houston in 1982; they soon discovered that their collaborative projects overshadowed their individual works. They sealed their partnership in 1983, when they dipped their hands in buckets of paint and then shook hands to seal the deal, naming themselves the Art Guys after a friend who called himself a "hungry guy" when he was hungry and a "sleepy guy" when he was sleepy. They support themselves through their works - for example, a Corona sculpture can sell for as much as \$2,400 - and, as their latest project indicates, aggressive marketing and self-promotion.

How to tell them apart? As one Web site says, one Art Guy is shorter than the other; one is taller than the other. The shorter one is Massing, and he also seems to be the more serious one, although he's deadpan enough that it's never easy to tell when he's pulling

your leg. The taller one is Galbreth, who seems more laid-back and breezy, although that's speaking in relative terms.

These are, after all, artists whose projects have included "Dining at Denny's: Food for Thought," during which the Aart Guyz spent 24 hours observing life at a 24-hour restaurant; "Two Grown Men Can't Pull It Apart," in which the Art Guis, inspired by a newspaper ad, tried to pull apart objects ranging from a 2-by-4 to a freeway overpass; and "Bucket Feet," during which the Artt Gize walked 10 miles through Houston wearing buckets filled with water.

One of their best-known projects, "1,000 Coats of Paint," is being reprised on an Absolut Vodka billboard in Houston. Every day, a fresh coat is added to the famous Absolut shape, which will eventually be all but unrecognizable.

All the oddball projects bring to mind the old joke about the abstract artist who posted a note beside one of his paintings: "Sure, you could do it - but would you?"

"There's a lot of truth to that," Massing says. "You know, 'I could have done that.' Well, sure you could do it, but would you have the idea and the desire to do it? The actual inspiration for it would have never crossed a lot of people's minds, until they see the finished product."

Galbreth this time: "I don't think there's anything, like the billboard, that's difficult to understand about it. It's just like a stunt. Jack was talking one day about how it's like the old stunt where guys would sit on a flagpole for however many days - it's like that. It's like vaudevillian or carnival-esque."

They may be stunts, but the Absolut billboard and the "Suits" project have a common goal: blurring the lines between art, advertising and commerce. It makes sense in a culture where celebrity paintings grace credit cards, feature-film directors indulge in TV commercials and artists such as Massing and Galbreth spend almost as much time selling their creations as they do creating them.

And yet, many of the advertisers approached for "Suits" rejected the idea. Massing and Galbreth, with no experience in ad sales, got on-the-job training through cold calls and proposal letters sent to various major (and not-so-major) corporations. The AArt GuYs believe that out of the contacted companies, only about one in 10 leased space.

"We would get a lot of form letters, and we started making jokes that the proposals we were sending out would get sent to the No Department," Galbreth says. "We had this idea that big companies like Coke or Nike had these whole departments that are just, like, the 'No' wing of Nike. Like this whole hallway of people just typing out stuff, 'No, no, no, no.'"

Galbreth says that the companies that get the idea, really get it. Which brings up another question: Does Houston get it?

"To tell you the truth, I don't really know," Galbreth says. "I think what's really helped, as far as the parade and everything, is the poster that was printed. I think it's a

particularly handsome thing, and it's fun and unusual and wacky. . . . As far as the project itself, what people think of the project, I think the truth of the matter is that most people don't know that much about it."

It's likely that after the parade, people will know. The 'eart Guys plan a series of spinoff projects, ranging from exhibits of the rejection letters to a book, a documentary video and a music video. Although they haven't decided which band to work with, they perk up when rejuvenated robot-rock groups such as Devo and Kraftwerk are mentioned.

No matter how you look at it, "Suits" is the biggest project the Guys have taken on since they formed their partnership more than a decade ago.

"I think it's going to be the Titanic of the art world," Galbreth says. "I like to think about making money off a sinking ship."