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It's unassuming art square studios

by Shelby Strudler
Photography by Kevin Jeffries

You'd drive right by it if you weren't looking for it (as I did).

But what you shouldn't do is keep on driving. Stop.

Step inside Art Supply and Art Square Studios at 2711 Main St., and you'll find an art store complete with paints, brushes, frames and whatever the artist in you needs. In the back of the shop is a large steel door that is a story in and of itself. Behind that door is a first floor of studios and a second floor with more studios and lofts. In all, 28 studios and seven loft apartments.

It's what I imagine a modern-day commune to be, except this is a building full of artists, not hippies. The bare white walls are covered in renditions, drawings, sketches, paintings or whatever the artist who lives behind the door produces.

An assortment of artists live in residence at Art Square Studios. The residents range in age from the mid-20s to their 70s. There are students, professional artists and art professors. There are photographers, graphic artists and painters.

In a city full of town homes, lofts and luxury apartment homes popping up like they're going out of style, it's nice to see a living establishment where people are brought together by the one thing they love to do — create art.

Vikki Trammell and her husband, Ben Russell, have owned Art Supply for 43 years. Before moving to Main Street, they were located at Richmond and Montrose.

Trammell describes their new place, complete with living space, "a labor of love." Indeed it must be because Trammell and Russell had to rewire the building, replace the plumbing, knock down walls and deal with an asbestos problem. They charge from the low 200s to the mid 400s per month for their studios; but despite having tenants, Trammell and Russell are still paying off the bank.

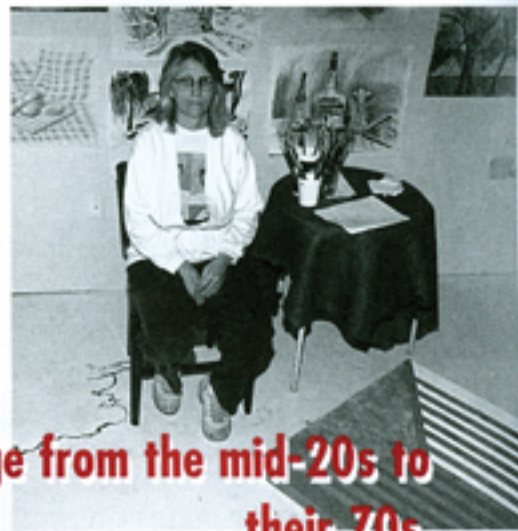
Seven banks turned down Trammell and Russell. They were turned down so many times simply because there was really nothing of its kind in Houston. Banks didn't want to take a chance on something that might not be successful. That's where they were wrong. For the last two years, Art Square Studios has been filled to capacity.

Only one bank was right. Just days before they were going to lose the Main Street place, Sterling Bank came through and offered them a loan. "We have a great relationship with them," Trammell said. "They went the extra mile with us. We make a statement that it can be done."

The other great relationships they have forged are with their tenants. Often times tenants will meet down in the back of the store and eat meals, discuss what the day holds and what they're working on. "It is a complex where people share," Trammell said. "They [the residents] become friends. They work as a unit."

Donna Durbin, an artist in residence, works with textiles and loves the space afforded to her. Housed in an interior studio with no windows, Durbin has made her workspace into more than just a place where she works — she creates in her space. Recently, Durbin was commissioned to design a piece of art for the Doubletree Hotel outside of Dallas.

Other artists are hoping that the Midtown Visions, which takes place the last Saturday every April, will bring more paid work their way and more recognition for the work that they generate.



The residents range in age from the mid-20s to their 70s.

Midtown Visions is an open house of sorts in Midtown and beyond. For those not familiar with Midtown, it is a section of the city right on the edge of downtown that is being revived thanks in large part to such places as Art Square Studios and other new living spaces.

The tour includes the studios where their art can be purchased, as well as galleries, theaters, museums and colleges.

This is the second year for Midtown Visions, which brings a lot of people to Midtown that might not otherwise venture to that part of town, Trammell said.

But while Midtown expands and grows, Art Square Studios will stay solely in place. Housing 28 artists that compliment one another and have fun, Art Square Studios is probably on the verge, like many of its artists, of breaking out.

There are very few living quarters like Art Square Studios across the United States, but Trammell would like to see that change. While content with the complex that she and her husband have created, Trammell would love to do it all over again.

"I would love to do this all over the U.S.," Trammell said. "I'd also love to do another complex in Houston. It helps save wonderful old buildings, and it gives artists a quality place to create in."

Trammell also entertains the idea of a studio exchange program with the few similar complexes that do exist in the country. Having the program, Trammell points out, would allow people in Houston to experience different artists and their works of art. The artist would stay in Houston for three months, while the Houston resident would exchange places and live in another city for three months.

But for now, Trammell will continue nurturing the artists that she has befriended. "We have a dynamic art scene," Trammell said. "We have a growing art scene. We have a lot of things happening." One of those is Art Square Studios.

This was a dream for Trammell, and it seems to have come true. For 10 years Trammell dreamed of owning a multitude of stores. Now she's gotten her art store with the people she has become friends with and a place where creativity prospers. "I have the studio and the store," Trammell said. "I'd be happy forever."

Art Square Studios and Art Supply are located at 2711 Main St. at Dennis. For more information, call (713) 652-5028.