

## THE BORDER ART RESIDENCY: WHEN? HOW? WHY?

By Becky Hendrick

We'd lived in La Union for a dozen years before Ray outgrew his studio. We called our big house "the Cantina" because that's what the building had been for thirty years before sinking into a decade of abandoned disrepair. La Ooh's once-famous "Central Bar" (AKA "Loco's Place," how apt) became our home in 1984, and it was a designer's dream with its 4000 square feet defined by only five rooms. For the next twenty-five years the Cantina evolved along with our ever-changing lives, art, and projects. At one point the place earned a nice feature on a Home & Garden television show; where the heck did I put that video?

In the mid-1990s, Ray (sculptor and UTEP Professor Emeritus Willie Ray Parish) started looking for a studio in biking distance from the house, going nearly as far as Anthony --- checking out horse barns, sheds, that sort of thing ---when the property across the street became available. Quick, hurry, negotiate, tally, borrow, pay, sign here, and it was ours! An old three-room adobe casita was incidental to the big cotton gin that Ray quickly filled with tools and sculpture equipment and the resulting art.

It must have been two years before the downstairs was "done" to his liking, at least enough for him to wonder what was up above, "upstairs" had there been a stairway. When he poked his head through the ceiling, he saw what every sculptor, architect, builder, or other 3-d-oriented type calls Heaven: empty space and lots of it, just waiting to be shaped. There were wooden ceiling joists making nice triangles, and a central cube projecting up through the roof, but it was all that emptiness: to Ray's eyes, it was nothing but potential.

And so it began in 1997, three years in which Ray spent every single day (I say with only slight exaggeration) and more money than we had in order to make a 2000 square foot loft for some lucky, future renter. This would've been the fifth or sixth major renovation we'd undertaken in our long partnership, but this time I called a Time Out: it's all yours, I said many times from my studio in the house across the street.\* And when I tell the story of our residency's beginnings, I always admit that I really and truly did not help. What *did* I do? I didn't complain, that's what.

As Ray designed and built, he thought a lot about his sculpture students and how they, or art majors like them, might benefit from a space like the one he was making. Serious art students often go on to get their MFA degrees, but then what? All a creative person wants is uninterrupted time and enough money for survival (see Virginia Woolf for more on the need for one's own room and a bit of cash). The beautiful and functional loft he was making began to take shape along with the idea for the non-profit it would ultimately become: a residency for artists who come to the border or who come from the border, the Border Art Residency, the BAR.

We were lucky to know a lot of folks who were active in El Paso's civic life and, more specifically, the arts. Early on, Ray met with a special patron who did research, made contacts, and enabled the residency program to be "born" and to thrive under the umbrella of the El Paso Community Foundation. The BAR's initial Board of Directors undertook a year of phenomenal fundraising, and, with annual contributions from patrons and friends, the residency continues to use its endowment for modest expenses and to remain self-sufficient (with occasional and appreciated grants and gifts).

There are no paid employees. Ray maintains and improves the property, fully furnished by our original benefactors; the endowment provides a modest monthly rental payment that covers utilities and repairs. Together Ray and I do the secretarial chores, and I play den-mother when and if someone needs a bit of company. Our Board and the El Paso Community Foundation plan and execute fundraisers and special events, and they probably don't know how much they are treasured. (You are treasured.)

Our first artist moved in on January 1, 2000, and he stayed for six months. The next artist had a 9-month residency, followed by one that was scheduled for an entire year. We finally settled on a 10-month period of residence that coincides with the school year. Each artist receives a monthly stipend that over the years has doubled in size. The resident is selected by a panel of well-known artists and arts professionals from all over the country from (now) online applications and digital images of his/her work.\*\* By happenstance rather than design, the BAR's occupants have been almost equally divided between male and female, local and national/international (three came from Japan), Hispanic and non-Hispanic.

We "Boomers" were a generation schooled in serious Modernism and, now that a new word is necessary, Postmodernism. Ray's (and my, and the selection committee's, and the Board's) intention has always been to make the BAR available to serious artists who continue to "push the envelope," to question what art has been and what it can be now, *for* now. From the beginning the selection standard was set very high, and that is one legacy of the BAR that we hope will continue long into the future, for Art's sake, of course, but for El Paso's sake, as well.

Each resident's needs and productivity have turned out to be unique. Perhaps one or two of the seventeen artists to date have used traditional media and techniques, but art in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century may not be quite what you'd expect. One year all the studio's surfaces were covered with dead insects, butterflies, and crawfish from the artist's walks on the area's dry irrigation ditches; another resident had nothing but electronic "supplies" and spent his tenure taking 7,000 photographs that he continues to use in his work a decade later.

And there is not a single requirement placed on the artist, not one. The gift of time is for each individual's needs; for all we care, s/he can read for ten months. Or sleep. Or travel, using La Union as home base. But without fail, every artist (their ages have

ranged from the mid-20s to early 50s) has used the time for incredible productivity and discovery, and almost every one has elected to have an exhibition to share the new work. Quite a few have taught a class at UTEP, NMSU, or EPCC, to reinforce their budgets, to meet other like-minded people, and to make new friends. Many of our artists return to visit us over the years and some are as close as our own kin.

This is a bittersweet season, as Ray and I plan the upcoming chapter, the AARP one, of our long, shared art-life. In the next year or so we will sell the property to some visionary person or entity, the BAR will change in ways we could never anticipate, and we will be at a distance, watching with hopes for more successes and surprises, and with a bit of pride, as well.

Perhaps you will join us to celebrate the Border Art Residency's *first* fifteen years at our annual fundraising --- *FUN*raising --- party on October 4. I promise you won't regret it or forget it!\*\*\*

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\*The key to a long and satisfying marriage, we've said only in partial jest, is having separate sides of the street!

\*\*There are too many wonderful stories to tell, but one of them appears at this link:  
[http://beckyhendrickartlife.ipage.com/Blog/Entries/2010/4/21\\_Thinking\\_about\\_Luis\\_Jimenez.html](http://beckyhendrickartlife.ipage.com/Blog/Entries/2010/4/21_Thinking_about_Luis_Jimenez.html)