



Bill FitzGibbons & Blue Star Contemporary Art Center

Story by Christa Brothers – March 21, 2014



There are not many people who have never heard of the Blue Star, as San Antonians call it, or as it is officially named, Blue Star Contemporary Art Center. A well-established institution in Southtown San Antonio, well regarded throughout the United States, Blue Star has recently stretched itself even further. As part of Blue Star Contemporary Art Center's International Initiatives, it collaborated with the Consulate General of Spain to showcase young artists from that country, worked with The Japan Foundation to organize an exhibit, forged an ongoing cultural exchange with Iceland and is in the process of finalizing another cultural exchange program with Germany.

Between the current day thriving art community and its rather humble beginning lays a lot of history, a lot of energy, and a lot of determination. Most of all though, it took people with an enormous amount of passion for the arts, and visionaries who could see the immeasurable cultural enrichment a center for contemporary art would bring to the Alamo City.

Bill FitzGibbons, Blue Star Contemporary Art Center's president and executive director for the last 10 years, seems to have just that. An accomplished artist himself, he has the love and understanding for the arts. Through it, he brings the insight and understanding toward the difficulties and the support artists need when working with the center. FitzGibbons has experienced the world of art from an administrator's point of view as well. Having been appointed as the Director of Sculpture at the Visual Art Center in Anchorage, Alaska and becoming the Department Head of Sculpture at the San Antonio Art Institute in 1988, he also has the knowledge to lead an art institution. Experiencing both sides of the art world, from the artist point of view as well as from the administrative side, puts him in a unique position.

In addition, FitzGibbons also has his own history with the Blue Star Contemporary Art Center. Even before he became the art center's director 10 years ago, FitzGibbons was already involved with Blue Star on and off as a board member with various duties and assignments. As to the beginning of the art center itself, the birth of Blue Star was an accidental one, a combination of rebellion, tenacity, and creativity. A group of artists whose upcoming art show at a San Antonio art venue was cancelled got inventive. Instead of accepting defeat, they started to look for an alternative space to present their art work. At the time, in 1986, Bernard Lifshutz had acquired old warehouses on South Alamo Street and agreed to make the space available for the exhibition. Instead of the 300 visitors or so the group of artists had hoped for, 3000 people came.



This overwhelming response demonstrated that there was definitely an interest in just such an art venue. The idea was born, but to bring the art space to its full potential took an initiative and the already mentioned vision for the future of a Blue Star Contemporary Art Center.

When I recently had the opportunity to sit with FitzGibbons in his office at Blue Star, he passionately spoke about his vision for the art space. He expressed his strong believe that "it is important to give artists a voice, to provide them with a platform for a variety of art in different media, and on the other hand, offer quality art to the art patrons".

For the past 25 years, The Blue Star Contemporary Art Center has been that place. From paintings and drawings on traditional substructures to installations where vent pipes and air-conditioning ducts got "clothed" in suggestive pink vinyl, to sculptures fashioned from shoes or covered with legal tender one dollar bills by San Antonio artist and UTSA professor Ken Little, the art center has fostered a tremendous number of artists.

For many local artists, Blue Star Contemporary Art Center has been the spring board to gain national and international acclaim in the art world. In turn, Blue Star has also brought an array of diverse national and international artists to San Antonio, widening the art experience for local artists and its patrons alike. "It is invaluable to forge these connections between artists", Bill FitzGibbons explained. "Besides being exposed to

new ideas and visions, one never knows to what opportunities they might lead in the future". Fitzgibbons' own experiences in his career as an artist might have influenced his hopes and dreams for the art center.



Bill FitzGibbons received his BFA in Sculpture and Art History from the University of Tennessee, and his MFA in Sculpture and Multi-Media from Washington University in St. Louis. Friendships with other artists and the belief that "when you are true to yourself, doors will open" took Fitzgibbons to different corners of the world. From exhibiting in England, working in Alaska, installing "Poem of Light" on the City Hall of Reykjavik, Iceland for their Museum Night celebration,

to experiencing the world through a Fulbright scholarship, FitzGibbons knows about the importance of international exposure.



Not only is Bill FitzGibbons looking to bring the cultural experience from outside to the art center, he is also interested in enriching San Antonio's own art culture. Mosaic, Blue Stars outreach pro-gram, is fostering community interaction around art from after school programs for youth, to activities for adults and elders. FitzGibbons himself is also active in the art community. "Alamo Lights", one of his installations that bathed the Alamo in curtains

of light during Luminaria, San Antonio's celebration of the arts, was one of the most featured art pieces from the event. A permanent public art installation by FitzGibbons, Light Channels, not only offers an exceptional art experience, it even provides safety for pedestrians.

By now it is probably abundantly clear how Bill FitzGibbons feels about Blue Star. I was also curious about his personal artistic endeavors. "I followed my bliss as Joseph Campbell advised — no regrets", he said with some satisfaction. "Once you decide to do something, things will hap-pen, and if you are true to yourself, doors will open. I became an artist because it allows me to touch other people's lives. The connection one achieves through art with others can only be matched by the love of two humans for each other." I would call that unmistakable passion for the arts.