

A house helped make couple 'brave': Tour features Houston homes with museum-worthy art collections

By Lisa Gray



"Living With Art," The Rice Design Alliance's 2012 architecture tour, focuses on the houses of serious art collectors. From the outside, it's obvious that 2002 Mason -- Brad Nagar and Reid Sutton's house, designed by Wittenberg Olberholzer -- isn't stuffy. The sculpture, "Stacked," looks as if it's made of three Mylar balloons. But actually, sculptor William Cannings pumped air into heated steel cubes to make them look inflated. Photo: Hester + Hardaway / HC

Ten years ago, the day that builders finished the house's third floor, Brad Nagar stood outside it and cried. He couldn't believe that he and his partner, Reid Sutton, had done it. He couldn't believe the place was theirs.

Sure, the address - 2002 Mason, in the Fourth Ward - wasn't fashionable. At the time, Brad says, "Mason was one of the biggest crack-selling streets in town." And yes, it was next door to a halfway house.

But Realtors are wrong: Location isn't everything. Dreams are something, too.

Brad grew up "a poor kid in Westbury." And Reid, he says, was "a farmer from Kentucky." Sure, they'd launched real careers: Brad as a computer consultant, Reid as a geneticist. And sure, they loved good architecture.

They'd worked hard to afford the place, and to plan it. And by the time they found architecture firm Wittenberg Oberholzer, they were able to specify their desires with an unusual level of precision: not just "beautiful" and "not stuffy," but also "25 feet of counter space" and "no interior columns."

I think of Brad's teary moment - standing outside, unable to believe the house is theirs - as a happily-ever-after, the point when the dream comes true. But in a way that he and Reid didn't yet understand, their story was just beginning.

The house wasn't just a symbol of how much their lives had changed. The house itself was about to change them.

'Unusual emotional involvement'

Reid picked the colors, Brad explains: the orange of the enormous slanting columns outside, the spring green of the living room wall, the pinks and teals and oranges that line the foot-deep little "window wells."

Before they moved into the house, the couple owned one big painting, "Working Vice 1998," a somber painting about Cuba that involves a vice, a map and tea staining.

But the bold, open house seemed to demand more art - and a different kind of art. "The house," says Brad, "made us brave."

They began buying small pieces of art at charity auctions. And slowly, a kind of fever took hold of them both. Their buys became bigger and bolder - an eye-popping Susie Rosmarin plaid painting here, an unsettling Angela Fraleigh there.

"We don't have any big theory," says Brad. "We buy what we like." And what they buy is eclectic: paintings, sculptures, even complicated video art. Houston artists, Latin-American artists, and anyone else who catches their eye.

But patterns emerge. Almost everything is very contemporary, and much of it is as bright as the colors Reid picked for the house. Much is by Houston and Latin American artists; most is by artists still early in their careers; and an unusual percentage aims to make the viewer laugh.

"A lot of it shows unusual emotional involvement or effort by the artist," says Brad. "If it looks like something I could make, I don't want it."

Consider, for instance, the William Cannings sculpture, "Stacked," that presides over their front yard. It looks like three stacked Mylar balloon cubes, each somehow balancing on a corner. But the cubes are actually made of automotive steel, Brad explains. Cannings created hollow steel cubes, then heated them up to more than 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and forced air into them, "inflating" the steel. Covered in red, yellow and blue metal-fleck paint, they look ready to float away.

Or consider the obsessive-compulsive, heartbreaking and funny work of Dario Robleto, one of Brad and Reid's favorite artists. "Lost Shipment of an Untested Love Potion" looks like three crates of corked bottles. But the artist made everything about it - the crates, the bottles, the labels. And inside the

bottles, there is, in fact, an untested love potion - one whose ingredients includes (real) ground bits of every bone in the human body, sulfur, and melted vinyl from the Roy Orbison record "In Dreams."

As Brad and Reid began to collect Robleto's work, they got to know the artist - to know details such as why Robleto so often uses vinyl records in his work. (Robleto was the product of a short-lived relationship - "a Beatles-induced haze," he's called it - between two rock-music lovers. The records he uses are often from his parents' own collections.)

And they found themselves, in a small way, drawn into Robleto's life. For "Love Survives the Death of Cells", a show at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, Robleto wanted to record the heartbeats of 50 couples as they sat together in a room, looked into each other's eyes, and thought about how much they loved each other. Robleto then transferred the digital recordings to tape and heated the tapes, melting them into filaments, which he braided and inserted into hand-blown glass hearts.

Brad and Reid were pleased to be one of those couples. And after the show, they were moved that Robleto gave them the braided filament of the tapes made from their two heartbeats. It is one of the things Brad loves most in their collection - a complicated, happily-ever-after totem from a life that's surprised him.