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Home • This Month's Issue • Buzz • The BOB Awards • Sister Publications • Links • Advertisers • Contact Us

Go, Do

- Concerts
- Dance
- For Kids
- Galleries
- Home & Garden
- Museums
- Readers and Speakers
- Special Events
- Sports
- The Big Screen
- Theater
- Venues

Eat, Drink

- Restaurant Guide
- New in Town
- The Dish
- Uncorked June 2004: Wines for the Dog Days

Extra, Extra

- Mosaics: Grab a Chair
- Furniture Fare: Navigating the Outlets
- Merry Manse
- Past Features

Insider's Guide

- Past Features

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This Month's Issue

Real Estate

Art Rising

Amidst the ashes of industry in South End, a vibrant art community has emerged. But can it last?

By Tess Gadwa

It's gallery crawl night in South End, and the rain is coming down hard outside Clay on Camden. Undeterred by the latest June downpour, clusters of people talk, laugh, and admire the works on display: abstract sculptures that fuse ceramics and stained glass, female torsos with a coppery iridescent finish, and colorful raku jugs and urns. A woman in platform shoes and a black dress moves through the crowd, an oversize turquoise drink umbrella perched jauntily in her upswept hair. In the next room, twenty-nine-year-old Dean Reganess tells how he learned to carve sandstone, granite, and marble from a master stonemason in Ireland. Bluegrass music wafts out of the adjoining coffee shop, where banjo, guitar, and mandolin players jam for an enthusiastic audience.

Next door at Art Bar, the soundtrack is indie rock. Concentric red and green circles on the floor guide you into the space, where Nada Surf's guitar fuzz pulses from the stereo system. Artist and gallery founder Jay Crider hands out drinks behind a concrete bar studded with cigarette lighters and metal matchbox cars. The art is as fresh and edgy as anything you're likely to see in Charlotte—works feature the skeleton of a fetal pig, shoes suspended on wires, and a baby next to a mousetrap. Other pieces include large painted nudes, a brilliant green-and-yellow lizard in a doorway, and Crider's signature urban street scenes, many featuring timeworn Charlotte landmarks. Several paintings sit on chairs, one with a prosthetic leg in front of the chair—it's not clear whether the leg is part of the artwork or has just been accidentally left there.

Art Bar is only the latest addition to a South End art scene that has exploded with activity over the past two years. South End now has as many galleries as the North Davidson (NoDa) arts district—maybe a few more, depending on how you count them. Add theater space, design firms, nightclubs, and cafes to the mix, and it's easy to see why the area has developed a reputation as a destination for creative types. But will South End's arts scene be a victim of its own success? As furniture showrooms and upscale condominiums replace vacant lots and abandoned factories, some artists and gallery owners worry that they too will eventually be forced out.

Jay Crider is one of the handful of artists who live in the South End area. A classic Piedmont drawl accompanies his tattoos, ripped jeans, and shaggy blond goatee. Crider grew up on Charlotte's west side and returned to the city two years ago, after attending graduate school at Savannah College of Art and Design. In addition to showing innovative work by regional artists, Crider hopes to use Art Bar as a venue for life drawing, art auctions, live music, spoken word, and black-box stage.

"I want it to be approachable, rock-and-roll, interesting, eclectic... the kind of art you can't get anywhere else," Crider says.

Filling a very different niche—but equally distinctive—is the collection at McColl-Shiraz. The fine arts gallery from Hugh McColl Jr. and Massoud Shiraz opened this March in the old Dilworth post office building at the corner of East and South boulevards. Ring the bell, walk through the collection of portraits, landscapes, and rustic scenes from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries, and you'll see names like Childe Hassam and Eugene Boudin, familiar from museums and art history textbooks.

While we're dropping names, let's add Lichtenstein, Miró, Chagall, Rauschenburg, and Warhol—whose signed lithographs have all been shown at Elder Art, just a few blocks farther up on South Boulevard. In business since November 2001, the gallery shows a mix of contemporary and vintage art. "We're a gallery that's constantly changing," says founder Larry Elder.

Meanwhile, Hidell Brooks has dealt exclusively with living, contemporary artists since opening in 1998. Clay on Camden (formerly Myersart Gallery) features clay and stone sculpture as well as original pottery, and across the street the Charlotte Art League offers studio and gallery space to emerging painters, photographers, and craft artists.

When a certain critical mass is reached, an area becomes an arts destination. Creativity breeds creativity, and a neighborhood is known not just for a few outstanding galleries but for a collection of restaurants, nightlife, performance venues, and design businesses, all in close proximity.

"I think we've capitalized on the momentum that we've seen happen here—that hodgepodge of creativity," says Kevin Gullette, former executive director of Historic South End (he left at the end of June).

One of the newest additions is the SouthEnd Performing Arts Center (SPAC). This converted warehouse, black-box theater on Rampart Street seats about 100 people, and includes cabaret seating and "house lights" that are actually inverted household lamps with shades. SPAC opened in January 2001 as the first permanent home for BareBones Theatre Group. It hosts productions by other local theater groups, as well as live music, workshops, and poetry readings. Naturally, there is original artwork on display in the lobby.

"I knew that this was a growing place. You've got the design community and the visual arts . . . more people are hearing about us in South End," says Camille Dewing-Vallejo, communications director of BareBones.

Regular South End events include the Gallery Crawl the first Friday of every month, plus the outdoor Camden Market on Saturdays, with fresh produce, flowers, baked goods, antiques, arts, and crafts from a number of local businesses. Approximately 100 artists and vendors will be part of the next Art and Soul block party, scheduled for October 4. Last year, Gullette says, the event drew 7,000 people.

A quick walk up Camden Street reveals that the area's creativity is hardly confined to galleries and studios. Next door to Pike's Soda Shop, a large metal sculpture dominates the lawn in front of the Design Center. A few blocks north, artwork covers the boldly painted walls of Borealis Salon and Phat Burrito. Inside The Queen's Beans, high-tech thermometers monitor the brewing temperature of locally roasted organic coffee, while the distorted faces of Jeff Cravotta's circular photographs add an edgy twist to cream-colored carpeting and ergonomic furniture.

The tiny coffee shop is built into the larger Clay on Camden gallery. With its high ceiling and large windows, it feels cozy rather than cramped. Nearly all the artists, designers, and software programmers who stop by for their morning coffee stay for a little while to chat.

Johnice Stanislawski, originally from Chicago, started The Queen's Beans in April 2002. An energetic woman with close-cropped blond hair, she sees her role as "contributing to the positive energy, the way we all support each other. I think the effort is genuine... that's what's bringing us the success that we have, and we're having a blast."

It wasn't always this way. Artist Linda Brown has had a studio on the block since 1990. She remembers a time when homeless people would sleep in front of the building and the only retail was a store selling beer, cigarettes, and Thunderbird wine. She credits Gaines Brown (no relation) with convincing her to rent the space. Gaines Brown moved his exhibit design business to Camden Road in 1983—back when the area was a decaying industrial corridor, long before anyone had thought up the name "South End." Over the next two decades he purchased additional nearby buildings and began renting to artists, photographers, and other creative professionals. He's continued to provide studio space to artists—at about half the market rate—even as South End real estate prices have climbed. "The idea was to give artists the creativity and independence to do their art," says Brown.

Many artists and gallery owners point to Brown as a force keeping emerging art in South End. It's not clear whether that will be enough. Nearly every arts district, from SoHo in New York to NoDa across town, grapples with the same pressures. South End is well known for its preservation of historic buildings, as well as for pedestrian-friendly initiatives like the trolley and eventually light rail. However, most residential housing is quite new—and these condominiums are often priced for brokers and bankers, or young professionals at the very least, not emerging artists. As more people choose to live and work in the neighborhood's newly renovated spaces, they generate more business and foot traffic for galleries, but also drive prices up.

Jay Crider removed 8,000 pounds of trash and installed every piece of glass in the Art Bar's historic 1939 Mission-style building. He says he has a good relationship with his landlord but acknowledges that despite the time and effort he has put into renovations, there's nothing to stop the owner from raising the rent in the future. "It's that eternal gentrification quandary..." says Linda Brown. "There's a period of a few years where things live in coexistence, and that really is exciting."

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