

From the Mother

JOHN RUNNELS CHANNELS THE ESSENCE OF ART AT MOTHERDOG STUDIOS

BY MEGHAN HENDLEY-LOPEZ

Coming from a military family, John Runnels was not a likely candidate to become an artist. A nomadic, yet romantic, life moving from landscape to landscape surrounded Runnels with various typographies. Due to his father's work in his line of duty, Runnels was also exposed to university laboratories and a world of medical books, encyclopedias, and other educational literature. As a young boy, Runnels was taken by both his surroundings in various cities along with the images he saw in these books.

Despite attempting to follow in his father's footsteps in the military, Runnels quickly realized that this was not the type of service for his ideas and talents. He pursued his art in higher education and picked up his vision along the way. After a trip abroad, Runnels found himself in Houston. As they say, the rest is history and history is something Motherdog Studios certainly has in flourishes. Housing visual adventures, hands of creativity, artists in every step of their career, Runnels has helped maintain a space for art in the city.

Runnels comes into 2018 on the heels of completing a ten year public art project in Phoenix, Arizona of a half-mile long water treatment plant wall. Winning a national competition based on his idea, the completed artwork, "SKY.LOOMS", now stands twelve feet high as a reference

to the Native Americans' name for rain (*virga*), a rain that falls but does not reach the earth. When the light is right rainbows are formed in the sky light of the falling rain—that is a sky loom. Now moving into the new year, Runnels took the time to reflect on how he ended up in Houston and how his studio has housed radical and refined renditions of visual art.

MEGHAN HENDLEY-LOPEZ: How has the city of Houston been for you as a gallery? What have been some factors that made you stay here in Houston?

JOHN RUNNELS: I did not want to come to Texas. The thoughts of windmills & tumbleweeds in the desert was not what I had in mind. In 1979, I had just returned from a summer of living in Italy on a Ford Foundation Scholarship with the University of Georgia. After the bliss of my Italian sojourn, a return to graduate school was anathema - a threat of incarceration.

Upon my return to the states, I did not want to go back to grad school so I did the most unlikely and bizarre opportunity twists in my life, I became a traveling salesman with a New York New Jersey company selling art & picture framing supplies. The East coast: the surf roar of the Atlantic Ocean. The misty mysteries high in the



John Runnels at home
in Motherdog Studios.
Photography by John Bernhard.

From left:
John Runnels, "Scene from the Florida
Room: a vision of earthly secrets
that can make sense of
earthy delights, 1977.

For the exhibition *Caution: Live Snakes*,
Keri Forster volunteered to have her
body airbrushed while opening visitors
observed and documented the
transformation. Professional Snake
handlers brought over a dozen boas
and pythons providing visitors with a
hands on experience.

A visitor is enchanted by the visual
fragrance of Keith Hollingsworth
painting *In the garden we worship a
higher source*, during the
2017 Flower & Garden show.



Appalachian Mountains. North Carolina was the landscape of his dream songs. The change of seasons. The fall of red, yellow and orange leaves. Thick white beds of snow under the fingers of naked trees. The spring noise of returning birds. The summer sea of green on the muscle of mountains. This was the denouement for his soul to soar. But, the ambitious New York company refused my literary itinerary request and shipped me to Texas.

Driving south down 59 from the big airport, I saw an iconic green highway exit sign in helvetica: RUNNELS AVE. It was a SIGN - a good sign. Houston has been very good to me! I was seduced by Houston immediately: the water fountains reminiscent of Italy (the Romans considered the sound of water an aphrodisiac), the academic strongholds of universities, the exciting thriving galleries and museums were all corroborations of "expect the unexpected." Houston was an arboretum. North and South Boulevard are surely where Cezanne would have set up his easel. But, it was the green space of the serpentine bayou that caught my heart eyes! Along Buffalo Bayou is where I made my first drawings, watercolors and pastels. I was an Italophile so everything I did became ITAL-Y-CIZED- those glorious monolithic old rice silos that overlooked Buffalo Bayou along the Allen Parkway became my "Texas Duomos."

MHL: Have you seen the impact of Mother Dog in regards to creating a dialogue about art within the studio for the residents and visitors?

JR: There is a point when quantity becomes a quality. The fact that Motherdog Studios is the oldest surviving artist studio exhibition space in the city is indicative of a longevity of commitment & perseverance. If alternative spaces are about anything, they are about the roots of everyday living and the necessity of everyday living to restore to itself the Artist's inspiration and grace. That is the spirit we began with 33 years ago.

We have provided working studio space for hundreds of Artists over the years. The spectrum is legendary from professionals artists working internationally and locally, art professors in Houston schools and universities to aspiring dreamers with the art spirit being scooted off the dining room table by a spouse. A tapestry of humanity pursuing the Laws of Beauty. On a daily basis, if your studio door is open, interaction is welcome. Security and privacy are paramount issues. There are lots of guidelines (rules) that have evolved over the years to provide

maximum working conditions.

Also, we have many art classes of all ages that visit Motherdog Studios. There are once upon a time high school Art students, that are now Art teachers, that are bringing their students to Motherdog Studios! That is one of those little prizes that has come full circle of fulfilling community service through the arts.

MHL: Any particular shows or exhibitions that were landmarks in the history of the space?

JR: I have presented some spectacular, magnanimous exhibitions at Motherdog Studios! Getting to LIVE with the ARTWORK is the bliss after the hard work of theme selection, artist involvement, administrative work and hanging most of my show are exhaustive in size and scope of 50 to 80 artists with sometimes over 200 Artworks. Fotofest provided me with my initiation into the excitement of curating shows.

Some of the early show titles were: *NAKED.naked*, *Fragments for a Memory of the Human Body* - obviously, the titles are indicative of a theme! The exhibitions were unique because I always interpenetrated the photographic wall presentations with hall sculptures. Regardless of the juxtaposition presentation of 2D & 3D, both share synonymous spatial issues.

My last FotoFest show presented George Krause's life size nudes taken in San Miguel de Allende. He said that folks down yonder were willing to model for him if he did not show the photos there. George approached me about showing them and of course I was thrilled and honored! The photos hang from the ceilings. I had set up a room for volunteers to undress so they could walk naked through George's nude photographs. In the first hour of the show, there were more naked people than clothed!

ARTCRAWL Houston became another opportunity to galvanize local artists and to present their artwork. I am still in awe that, as a non-organization organization of Artists, we arrived at a 25th anniversary Art event in 2017!

Some of the fun favorites were: *Raining Cats & Dogs*; *Don't Bug me*; and the current show *Flower & Garden*. The most exciting show was *Caution: Live Snakes!* We had a dozen boas & pythons for a snake-around-the-neck photo op audience participation. The women and children were teased, curious and daringly adventurous. The men, however, had a no-way-José attitudes of "the only good snake is a dead snake!"

Motherdog Studios was founded in 1984 by artist's Charlie Jean Sartwelle and John Runnels. This was their first "sign of the times" in the unwanted landscape tucked away just north of downtown.



Flower & Garden show curator John Runnels discusses Wayne Gilbert's *Sunflower* image making process with human remains. Photo by George Krause.

Motherdog Studios exterior doors & walls are neighborhood enhancements. Aesthetic ownership of the tempting wall deters irresponsible taggers that criss-cross the neighborhood.



John Runnels' drawings, paintings, photographs, poems and his sculpture installation of 100 women's black high heels from the series: *The Way Some Women Walk*.

PEGGY-USE Margeret Ann (PEGGY) Gorman posed for this iconoclastic *Don't Bug Me* Art exhibit at Motherdog Studios.



Early photo of John Runnels with his daughter Sara in his studio. circa 1988.

Motherdog Studios main entrance opened to the 2016 FotoFest exhibition of George Krause's *Sfumato Nudes* series.



Long time Artist-in residence at Motherdog, Liz Conces-Spencer discusses George Krause's 2016 FotoFest artwork with enthusiastic exhibition pARTicipants in the spirit of art & mind & body during the opening reception.

Musical performance dance scene with LadyBug during the *Don't Bug Me* Art exhibit at Motherdog Studios, 2014.



The corridor's walls of Motherdog Studios were turned into a secret hanging garden of Artwork for the 25th Annual Downtown Artist's Warehouse ARTCRAWL 2017