

## Houstonians Are Opening Up Their Homes to Emerging Artists

Home-based galleries are creating community in the art world by giving lesser-known local artists the opportunity to showcase their work.



Ruth Street Projects is run by artist Terry Suprean from his home in Third Ward.  
IMAGE: MICHAEL STARGHILL

FROM THE OUTSIDE, Ruth Street Projects looks like any other house in Third Ward. The 1930-built home sports a charming redbrick exterior and a row of large windows facing the street, likely added by a previous owner eager to let in more natural light than the original home allowed. Wooden gables hold court above the windows, painted a stern shade of gray. A charcoal-hued porch sits on the left side of the house. But where there should only be one door, there are two, both painted a rich shade of red: the front door leads to a residential living room, while the door on the left, opened by typing in a code, reveals what is likely Houston's smallest art gallery.

This pipsqueak space, run by Houston artist and art educator Terry Suprean from a spare room in his home, is one of many home-based art galleries found across the city. In addition to Ruth Street Projects, there's Front Gallery, run by painter Aaron Parazette and sculptor

Sharon Engelstein from—you guessed it—the front of their home. There's also Alabama Song, Pablo Cardoza Gallery, and a gallery simply named F run by Houston art transplant Adam Marnie. Home art galleries, and artist-run spaces in general, have as long of a history in Houston as they do in places like Los Angeles or New York City, and they're often a way for artists to create community around emerging talent without having to break the bank.



Behind this door is what is likely Houston's smallest art gallery.

Ruth Street Projects, named after the street the gallery is located on, is the culmination of years of work by Suprean. He ran now-defunct alternative art space Civic TV for nearly 10 years, first from an East End warehouse across the street from 8th Wonder Brewery, then from another cheaper and less-air-conditioned warehouse nearby, and later from a rental home in Northside. Eventually, Civic TV was reworked into a nomadic art pop-up that hosted shows in venues across Houston. Its last show was at FotoFest in 2020, an exhibit that had to become virtual due to social distancing. Because of the uphill battles he would

have faced finding ways to continue Civic TV during a pandemic, Suprean decided to put the project to an end and spend some time focusing on his own artwork.



Artist and art educator Terry Suprean likes to highlight emerging talent at Ruth Street Projects.

While Suprean is an artist in his own right, and regularly shows his abstract paintings in galleries around the city, he has always been interested in socializing and engaging with others to build community around art. Suprean believes that alternative spaces need to exist for the art world to be healthy. He says they can serve as a nice foil to commercial galleries, and show what is happening in colleges on the undergraduate and graduate levels—an early look, if you will, at the art we will be admiring a few years down the line. “If you think of a commercial gallery, there’s a kind of standard. They’re always white wall spaces in particular parts of town. Meanwhile, alternative spaces tend to morph. They aren’t really about capital, in a society that is obsessed with capital,” he says. “They can be really

interesting statements on how to build community, how to live sustainably, how to have art in a city without having to rely on more destructive capitalistic tendencies and consumers.”

“I think all artists have to find a way to give back to the community. For me, this is a way of doing that without it being a burden or a stressor on my own work.” —Terry Suprean

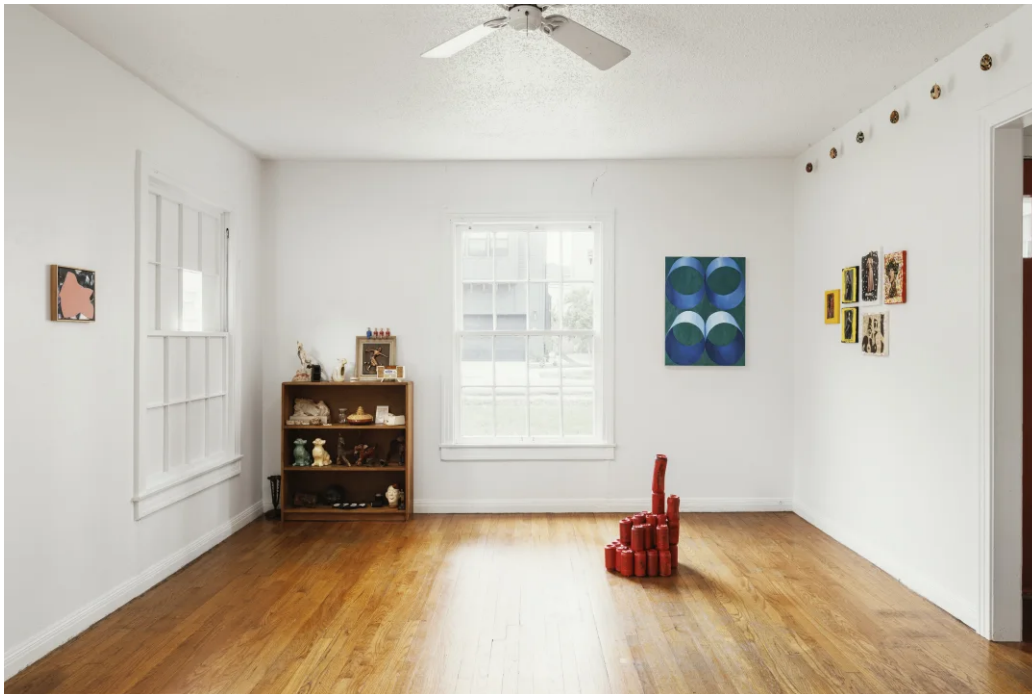
During a visit to Ruth Street Projects in June, pieces by local artist Isela Aguirre made up the featured exhibit. Colorful textiles sporting organic forms created through the cyanotype process, a type of photographic printing, hung throughout the space, including over the room’s singular set of windows—a necessity when your gallery space is about the size of an average home’s dining room. It’s the fourth show Suprean has opened in the gallery since its debut in October 2022.



During a visit to Ruth Street Projects in June, pieces by local artist Isela Aguirre made up the featured exhibit.  
IMAGE: MICHAEL STARGHILL

Since the gallery is in Suprean's home, there is a keypad on the door, allowing the artists participating in each show to come and go as they please as they bring guests to view their work. It's a hands-off approach that works for Suprean after spending nearly a decade running more heavily involved spaces. "I think all artists have to find a way to give back to the community," Suprean says. "For me, this is a way of doing that without it being a burden or a stressor on my own work. This is what I've arrived at after almost 10 years of experimenting with how to do an artist-run space. It has to be sustainable, and I think for every artist that looks different."

While Suprean is taking more of a backseat approach, home-based gallery owner Adam Marnie is fully in the driver's seat. A Minneapolis native, Marnie spent almost 20 years in the New York and Los Angeles art worlds before moving to Houston in 2019 when his now-wife, Rebecca Matalon, landed a curatorial job at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. He opened his gallery, F, later that year in the living room of his Rice Military home. Like at Suprean's space, entry to shows is by appointment, meaning he doesn't have to worry about unannounced visitors.



A previous exhibit at F, *Harry Smith's Shirt*, featured artists Amy Blakemore, blvxmth, Jen Fisher, Matt Kenny, Randi Long, Alice Mackler, Mary Manning, Nikholis Planck, Kerry Schuss, Amy Sillman, and Doug Welsh.

IMAGE: FRANCISCO RAMOS/COURTESY F, HOUSTON

Since Marnie, who is also an artist and publishes an art journal called *F Magazine* from his home, has spent so much of his career in New York and Los Angeles, many of the early shows at his gallery featured the works of artists based in those two cities. Now that he's become immersed in the local scene, more and more Houston artists, folks like Mark Flood, Doug Welsh, Amy Blakemore, Randi Long, and Iva Kinnaird, have had shows at F. "What's been really great about starting the gallery shortly after I moved here is that it's been a great way for me to build relationships with people here and to build a community," Marnie says. "It seems like there's a lot more need here in Houston. There are fewer opportunities here to show work and to start conversation and dialogue around artwork."



A previous exhibit at F, *Elizabeth Warren's Ear*, featuring artist Iva Kinnaird.  
IMAGE: SEAN FLEMING/COURTESY F, HOUSTON

"Houston is rich with artists, but not a lot of spaces for them to show their work early in their careers." —Adam Marnie

While Marnie is still relatively new to the city's art scene, he's done a lot of research on the history of alternative art spaces in Houston. The relatively low cost of living here makes it easier for someone to run a home-based gallery, but he's come to realize that the density of such galleries tends to ebb and flow as key characters either drop out or move to other cities. "It's easier to do in Houston because real estate is less expensive, but it's a much smaller audience. There's not as much affirmation here," he says. "Houston is rich with artists, but not a lot of spaces for them to show their work early in their careers."

Pete Gershon, the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art's curator of programs, is an expert on alternative art spaces in Houston. His book, *Impractical Spaces*, examines their cultural significance—from artist-run warehouses, to galleries run out of people's homes, to the birth of now-celebrated local arts nonprofits.

"Some people open up their homes and show artwork, and it's a really great way to circumvent the whole white cube, gallery, museum system. Artists can show artwork completely on their own terms," Gershon says of the appeal of the home-based approach. "You can see incredible art that you wouldn't get to see anywhere else at a home gallery, where there's really no risk. There's also no board of directors to risk offending. It's just a completely free and open terrain for people to show whatever kind of artwork they want to show."

Although some people deride Houston's actual working art scene—the real, day-to-day world that exists outside of our large art museums and institutions—Gershon is always quick to point out the scrappy nature of Houston's art community. It started to build in the '70s and '80s, he notes, when enterprising artists began laying the groundwork for art institutions that are lauded today, places like Lawndale Art Center and Project Row Houses. Home-based galleries bring incredible vibrancy to Houston, he says. Artists who may not get a chance to do so otherwise gain experience showing their work at home-based galleries, and interest in their work starts to spread. Gershon feels like these spaces, although they exist in cities everywhere, are well suited to Houston.

"I feel like there's something about the no-zoning ethos of Houston that's behind it all. And sort of a Texan approach and attitude to property rights, the 'I'm going to do whatever I want with my place' kind of thing," he muses. "It's not strange here in Houston to have an air-conditioned warehouse in the middle of a residential neighborhood, so why not hang art on your walls and open it up as a public proposition for people to come in?"

— DANIEL RENFROW