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ON AND OFF FREDERICKSBURG ROAD STUDIO TOUR FEBRUARY 22-23

By Ashley Festa
Photography Eric Lane

Take a walk down Fredericksburg Road in February, and you'll have the rare opportunity to see where some of San Antonio's finest artists live – and where they bring their imagination to life.

"We're promoting a lifestyle. It's a wonderful place to live, to work. It's easy, comfortable, casual," said Kellen Kee McIntyre, executive director of Bihl Haus Arts, a nonprofit contemporary art gallery dedicated to creating a community around all kinds of art. The annual On and Off Fredericksburg Road Studio Tour does just that.

With hundreds of artists (somewhere between 700 and 1,000, according to an informal survey) living in the area, Fredericksburg Road provides an ideal location for visitors to explore artists' inspirational environment.

"People want to see how the artists live, see where they work, sit down and have a glass of wine with them, get comfortable with them," McIntyre said.

Now in its seventh year, the self-guided studio tour at Fredericksburg Road – affectionately known as Fred Road to locals – draws close to 2,000 visitors from all

over the city, state and even the nation to indulge in two days' worth of artistic delights. The tour encompasses seven surrounding neighborhoods: Los Angeles Heights, Monticello Park, Jefferson, Woodlawn Lake, Beacon Hill, Alta Vista and Keystone. Each neighborhood is color-coded within the official On and Off Fred Road catalog of artists to highlight the distinct character of each area.

More than 70 artists grace the 100-plus pages of the catalog, but close to 200 other artists also participate in the tour, often as guests in a featured artist's studio. To be featured in the catalog, an artist must live or work in one of the seven neighborhoods.

The catalog itself is an important aspect of the studio tour. Purchasing the \$15 book – which includes the online mobile version – allows the buyer and a guest admission to the tour. For only \$5, visitors can buy the online-only version

instead of the hard-copy catalog.

"This is not a free tour," McIntyre said. "We do that to encourage visitors who are going to come and spend money. We want the artists that are on the tour to sell artwork. Several artists have sold several thousands of dollars on the tour.

"People take the catalog home and dog ear it. Then they go back and commission work," she said. "They become patrons of various artists. Some guests go back and buy something every year."

But visitors don't have to take out a loan to bring home a souvenir from the tour. Prices range from \$10 on up, and the variety of art on display is just as diverse. Jewelry, pottery, handmade gift cards, paintings, photography, sculpture, metalwork, weaving, cut paper, fashion design, hair design, live performances – you name it, it's probably on the tour.



Kathleen Trenchard



Rainey

"They're seeing artists in its broadest definition," McIntyre said. "There really is something for everybody. I end up being surprised every year. And if I end up being surprised and amazed every year, our guests are definitely going to be."

The studios themselves offer an array of visual interests for tourists. The smallest studios are not much more than a "glorified shed," McIntyre said, and the largest are a couple of old grocery stores converted into huge galleries and work space. Some artists don't have designated studio space at all, so they move their art to the front porch of their home for guests to peruse.

Beyond the art, the Fred Road area experiences an economic boost, thanks to the tour. Houses are sold, and apartments are rented before and after the tour. "The homes are quirky and fun," said McIntyre, who also lives in the area. "It's an artist-friendly community."

In fact, Fred Road was built for the purpose of cultural tourism. It's part of the Old Spanish Trail, a tourist road that the U.S. government built from 1919 to 1931. It started in St. Augustine, Fla., and ran through the South into San Antonio on its way to San Diego, Calif.

Fred Road was once a booming business corridor that took a hit in the 1960s when many of the area's retail shops moved to new locations. On and Off Fred Road has been recognized by the City of San Antonio because of its success at revitalizing the area.

For example, several businesses such as coffee shops and boutiques have opened in the area. "They follow the artists," McIntyre said. "We are not trying to gentrify anything. We want people to be comfortable here and live here into their 90s," she said.

"I just want people to come and experience what I've been experiencing for 18 years -- the beauty of the neighborhood, the charm, the little magical space that the artists' studios are."

On and Off Fredericksburg Road Studio Tour takes place Feb. 22-23 in seven neighborhoods surrounding Fredericksburg Road. For more information, visit www.onandoffred.org.

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