

Art Movers

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WORKS/San José announces new home in gallery row on South First Street

By Gary Singh

The future is never more than the bursting forth of what ought to have occurred earlier, or near the origin.—Stéphane Mallarmé

FINALLY, a group of people got together and did something right for a change. The alternative art gallery WORKS/San José is moving to South First Street. WORKS will take over 451 S. First St., the recently vacated space occupied by the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, which now has a permanent home next to *Metro's* offices. A grand opening for the new WORKS is scheduled for the beginning of March.

The relocation will undoubtedly help solidify South First Street as a thriving bohemian arts locale, which was precisely the plan for that street 16 years ago anyway. Along with MACLA, SJICA, Anno Domini, Green Rice Gallery and the San Jose Museum of Quilts & Textiles, WORKS will be a perfect addition to that area.

Legend has it that journalists are lazy ducks who only write about stuff within walking distance of their office, but this author assures you that that ain't the case this time. You see, during the late '80s, this stretch of First Street pretty much constituted the porno strip of downtown San Jose. A burgeoning live-music scene cemented by Cactus Club, Marsugi's, Ajax and F/X brought the neighborhood out of the dredges of porn, the "SoFA district" moniker was coined and folks realized that the potential for San Jose's own artsy, funky, rock & roll neighborhood was real.

All the ingredients were there. National touring bands made stops here, not just in San Francisco and Santa Cruz. You could walk or drive down to this neighborhood every other night and see all sorts of live bands in four different places all within staggering distance of each other. And many of those bands, like Nirvana, No Doubt and Alanis Morissette, later vaulted to worldwide stardom. The intersection of San Salvador and First Street became known to those of us who were there as "Four Corners" because we hung out there literally every night.

Unfortunately, that very scene collapsed for reasons that an entire portion of the South Bay populace including this author have complained about a thousand times, so we won't go into it, but now you can see it maybe coming back in the form of art galleries instead.

Sure, it ain't based on live music, but the attitude is there—a centralized locale where you can bump back and forth between galleries, check out the goods and just freakin' hang. The First Friday gallery hops are rocking events, and WORKS/San José will only make them even better. And you don't have to be a young "alternative" type at all. Folks from every nook and cranny of the spectrum show up at these events and the art sells.

WORKS itself has a long history, having first opened in 1977 at the corner of Vine and Auzerais—an intersection that is no longer there. Local artists from San Jose State University renovated the abandoned Western Mountaineering building and launched their own volunteer-run experimental venue for art, music and performance. Nothing remotely similar was going on in San Jose at the time.

Following its stint at Vine and Auzerais, WORKS migrated to the Leticia Building on South First Street during the last half of the '80s and then moved to Sixth and Jackson in Japantown. In 1996, the gallery moved to its present location at 30 N. Third St., where it fit nicely in the Sperry Flour Building. Through a quarter-century of ups, downs and ever-changing directorial boards, the organization has weathered the storm.

WORKS celebrated its 25th anniversary a few years back by issuing a 56-page catalog documenting almost everyone who's ever performed or exhibited there. This author's gigs were conveniently left out, but nevertheless, the book is a splendid insight into the changing arts climate in San Jose for the last 25 years. The next era of WORKS is about to begin, and to quote Emile Zola, "I am an artist ... I am here to live out loud."

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