

Statesman

At studio tour, talk turns from art to affordability

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

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Court Lurie usually spends the East Austin Studio Tour chatting with visitors about her large, expressive paintings.

But as one of only two artist tenants remaining at Art Post on East Cesar Chavez Street east of Springdale Road, the conversations during this year's tour — which began last weekend and continues through Sunday — have focused on one topic: the diminishing affordability of East Austin for artists.

"It's all everybody asked about," said Lurie, who has been a tenant at Art Post since 2008 and plans to stay in her 700-square-foot studio. "Everyone wanted to know where all the artists went."

The 2-acre site and its motley yet charming collection of repurposed World War II Quonset huts and other buildings had always been one of the livelier stops during the artist-originated tour, with guest artists exhibiting alongside residents and food trucks feeding the crowds.

After the property changed ownership in May, most of the artist tenants left and new tenants, including Transmission Events and an architecture firm, moved in.

Andrew Ashmore of Viceroy Realty Advisors, representatives of the new owner, said the intent wasn't to change the creative nature of Art Post as a mixed-use development of creative industry offices and entertainment.

"The intention was never not to rent to individual artists," Ashmore said. "But unfortunately economic realities mean that rents in East Austin are beyond what most artists can afford now."

It's a scenario that's unfolded in many cities: Artists have helped shape the current desirability of East Austin only to find themselves priced out.

Lurie believes the recent shifts in East Austin's arts landscape should be viewed in a much larger context.

"It's not just about one studio complex changing," Lurie said. "That's really just a symptom of Austin not having wide support for the arts, about not having a city structure that validates the importance of creativity. Artists are part of who made Austin weird and made it appealing to so many people who want to move here."

A recent survey, "Building Austin's Creative Capacity," commissioned by the city's Cultural Arts Division, polled more than 700 individual artists and arts groups citywide. All survey respondents rated Austin less than 3 out of 5 for "the arts and culture sector in Austin is well supported," and a majority of respondents said that the cost of living and working in Austin is a serious concern.

Shea Little, executive director of the nonprofit Big Medium that founded and produces the East Austin Studio Tour, said that while the total number of tour stops, just over 450, has held steady for several years, there are fewer individual artists with home studios participating and more businesses hosting exhibits during the tour. This year there are 287 artist studios and 152 exhibitions. Events and happenings make up the rest of the tour's numbered stops. Most of the individual artist studios are at warehouse complexes.

Started in 2002 by a handful of artists who carved out studios for themselves in warehouses on Bolm Road, the tour is open to any artist with an address east of Interstate 35, west of U.S. 183, south of U.S. 290 and north of Riverside Drive.

"It's hard to assess accurately because with our open admissions policy, changes to who is on the tour can sometimes feel arbitrary," said Little, himself one of the tour's founding artists who lives in East Austin. "But from people I talk to and from what I see, Austin's creative community is starting to disperse outward from the city's core."

Visual artists aren't the only ones reacting to East Austin changes.

Last month, the city's theater community was rattled by the news that Salvage Vanguard Theater will have to leave the facility on Manor Road that it's called home for nearly 10 years.

Again, a change in the property's ownership meant new lease terms, with Fairway Properties asking the nonprofit theater for four times the \$4,000 per month it currently pays.

"There's no way we can afford \$16,000 a month," said Salvage Vanguard artistic director Jenny Larson. "It's just not an option for us to stay in this building."

Representatives from Fairway couldn't be reached for comment about plans for the property.

Salvage Vanguard has a \$250,000 annual budget, Larson said.

The group uses its 6,000-square-foot building not only for its own shows but also for performances by more than a dozen small theater, dance and music groups. The theater's proximity to public transportation is key for its artists and audience members, Larson said.

Larson said the organization is looking at all kinds of options for a new home, but so far it has only found affordable space on the far edges of the city.

"For 10 years we've been an incubator, an urban arts hub — a place for up-and-coming or emerging performers and playwrights to get their work in front of an audience," Larson said.

"We've contributed to making the city, and particularly this part of Austin, a creative, dynamic and artistic place," said Larson. "If we move to the outskirts of town, to a location only accessible by car, what does that say about remaining accessible for our audience?"