

San Antonio Business Journal - April 7, 2008

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Friday, April 4, 2008

Entrepreneurial artists raising San Antonio's 'new media' profile

San Antonio Business Journal - by [Donna J. Tuttle](#)

Don't let Leslie Raymond and Jason Jay Stevens fool you. They might appear to be Bohemian artists -- residing and working in their sparse art district studios, attending yoga classes and drinking organic coffee from hand-crafted clay mugs.

But this married team is behind a contemporary new media movement that is taking high-tech interactive art to a whole new level in San Antonio and around the country.

Under the umbrella of Potter-Belmar Labs, the couple -- he an audio artist and she a visual artist -- is setting off for a West Coast tour in May.

Funded, in part, by a small MetLife Creative Connections grant, the nine-stop tour will start in Albuquerque, run through cities such as San Francisco, Portland and Seattle, and end in Los Angeles.

Their live cinema performance, titled "Fortune," is a dream-like mix of sound, music and moving images created from laptops, projectors and a bevy of other electronic devices. There is also an interactive element to the show: Audience members will pick tarot cards bearing descriptions of different states of being, and the resulting art performance will be a symbolic collective fortune telling.

"The audience determines the selection and arrangement of the vignettes, ensuring that no performance is like any other," Raymond says.

Raymond and Stevens are coming off a local high after their "Mixing Chamber" collaboration with local artist Stuart Allen was one of the centerpieces at the City of San Antonio's successful Luminaria Arts Night. Housed at the [San Antonio Museum of Art](#) (SAMA), the one-day installation was a light, sound and color kaleidoscope that drew in some of the estimated 100,000 Lumanaria attendees.

In addition, Raymond's students at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), where she is the



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Leslie Raymond, a video artist and one-half of Potter-Belmar Labs, started the New Media Studio Program at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

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director of the New Media program, also exhibited their multimedia masterpieces in the local **Houston Street Galleries** as part of Luminaria Arts Night. The couple's contributions are helping raise the art consciousness and bridge the new media gap between the hard-core art world and San Antonio's everyday Joes.

"Leslie and Jason are great assets to San Antonio's incredible artist community," says David S. Rubin, curator of contemporary art at SAMA. "... Today, artists have digital technology at their disposal and so much of our culture is dominated by it: computers, the Internet, iPods, cell phones, etc. We live in a media saturated world, so it's only natural that artists are using these technologies for creative experimentation."

Wolverines

Although they both were born and raised outside Detroit, Raymond and Stevens' personal and professional lives first collided at the University of Michigan in the late 1990s. Raymond was earning a master's in fine art degree in new media at the university after graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and teaching high school art for several years.

Stevens was an exhibit designer for the Ann Arbor Hands-On Museum in Michigan and was also working as an art and technology lab assistant at the School of Art+Design at the University of Michigan.

As Stevens was helping students in the university lab one day, Raymond sauntered in to visit her professor. It was love at first sight.

"When I saw Leslie, I thought, 'Who is that cool gal?' I had this very visceral feeling. It was like coins dropping in a vending machine. I needed to get to know her," Stevens says.

Stevens, who had apprenticed with sculptors, furniture makers and puppet fabricators -- as well as playing in punk rock and noise ensembles -- instantly started learning the video and sound ropes from Raymond, who specialized in moving images.

Together in 1999, they formed Potter-Belmar Labs, named for the cross streets at their first studio in Ann Arbor. Their first project was a large-scale interactive installation in an old warehouse space at the ArtCite Inc., a Canadian nonprofit, contemporary art center.

Titled "Pull," the piece featured a huge grid of strings with punch glasses and wooden handles levitating at shoulder length. When visitors tugged the wooden handles, they heard different sounds.

"We felt it was successful because of its interactivity," Raymond says. "We didn't have to put a big sign with directions. People wandered in as strangers, figured it out and started creating music together."

That project springboarded the couple into a world of technologically based media art, where they began experimenting with light, sound and images, and competing in film festivals.

At live audio/video competitions, the couple battled other A/V teams to mix and morph sounds and images.

"The judges would give us a theme like, say, Revolution, and we would have to interpret that immediately and be judged on it," says Raymond, who uses the moniker vjFutureWorkingGirl.

The couple consistently took top prizes at places like the Unreal Tournament at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and the Museu de Arte Contemporaneo in Santa Fe, Argentina. Raymond and Stevens spent the next five years performing all over the world, from Australia to New York City, Germany and California.

Whole new frontier

While living the life of contemporary art was exciting, it wasn't always profitable. Raymond, who had been adjunct teaching at the University of Michigan, decided to look for a full-time college teaching job.

When she spied UTSA's job description seeking an art professor to create the school's New Media department, she said: "That was written for me."

There was some hesitancy to leave Ann Arbor, a city with the oldest experimental film festival in the country, for San Antonio, which has a much smaller contemporary art community.

But both were game for a new adventure and moved to San Antonio in the summer of 2005. Ann Van Pelt, a real estate broker with locally based Phyllis Browning, helped the couple find a 5,500-square-foot office/studio building on Roosevelt Avenue before the property was even listed on the market. The space is located in an area just south of the city's newly burgeoning art district.

"Being artistic and urban, Leslie and Jason really understood the value in this space," Van Pelt says. "Since they were from out of town, they didn't have the same prejudices about this area that some local buyers had. Their young, fresh talent has given a real burst of energy to that part of town."

In addition to three baths and three bedrooms, the couple has plenty of space to work. Stevens configured a 3,300-square-foot studio on the ground floor; Raymond has a smaller studio located across the building's sun-drenched roof. They are renting the building's storefront office space to local firm Sunglo Management.

"We talked a lot about renting to artists, but the bottom line was that we needed a more mainstream type of business because we are relying on that steady rent income," Stevens says.

The couple works to run their studios and to advance their individual art careers in ways that make business sense. In addition to his work with Raymond, for example, Stevens stays busy designing and building exhibits for science museums across the country.

"There is a common misconception that an artist spends a lot of time in a room doing what they want to do," Stevens says. "Artists in the real sense are entrepreneurs, and successful artists are

successful entrepreneurs. Since there are two of us, it is a little easier."

Art S.A.-style

The couple says that overall they have been embraced by the local art community. Salon Mijangos and Blue Star Contemporary Art Center almost immediately featured both solo and combined works of the artists. Their live video performances were still a bit awkward for local audiences, though.

"When we first started performing here, the audience didn't realize we were working. We'd have people from the audience walk up and start talking to us in the middle of the piece," Raymond says.

To help bridge the gap, the couple started introducing audience participation, by asking viewers to write inter-titles for the pieces and including the titles in the final product.

In addition, as Raymond started her New Media classes, she noticed that the students' digital skills were light years behind those of her Michigan students.

"I felt like I was still in the 20th century," Raymond says. "In Michigan, the students came to the table already having 2-D design abilities. Here we had to start from scratch."

What's more, as a new department at UTSA, the equipment is limited.

"Only a few of my students have laptops," Raymond says. "In a New Media class, when each student has a laptop, it changes the culture of the class. Living with the tool and being able to move it around is a culture shift -- it opens up new possibilities."

Slowly, but surely, the program is growing, adding instructors and equipment here and there. And as they ready for their May tour, both Raymond and Stevens say they are happy to pronounce that they're based in San Antonio.

"San Antonio has a lot of high art going on. It has all the right ingredients and a rich culture that make it a perfect place for an artist," Stevens says.

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