

MODERN LUXURY
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Power Couple

Dan Oko | Photo: Julie Soefer | December 5, 2013



Sculptor Engelstein and painter Parazette with their work, at home in Montrose

The rise of artists Sharon Engelstein and Aaron Parazette, Houston magazine's 2013 Artists of the Year, has paralleled the 21st century emergence of Houston as a major capital for contemporary arts.

Here's how it's gone: The young couple was barely acquainted with Texas when they passed through H-Town on vacation in the late '80s. But, despite the recession and hard times the city was facing as a result of a down energy market, they found it a welcoming place for artists, with world-class museums to aspire to and be inspired by—and affordable studio space. So Houston landed on the short list of towns where they might settle when they finished art school.

That move came in 1991. Engelstein and Parazette, then married and with fresh degrees in fine arts from Claremont Graduate School in California, returned to Houston; both had been accepted by the MFA's Glassell School of Art "Core" residency program. When they finished that, they set up shop in a series of sweaty, cheap studios and began their careers in earnest. Eventually, the couple bought a Montrose bungalow and soon garnered

attention for their work from across Texas, and beyond—Engelstein as an organic and whimsical sculptor and curator, Parazette as a precise, geometrically minded painter and UH art teacher.

Fast-forward to today. The world now recognizes what Engelstein and Parazette noted 20 years ago. Houston, with its unique breed of career artists—who make their way here to study and never leave, finding the affordable quality of life almost as attractive as the potential to thrive creatively—is a well-established launchpad for those seeking national and international notoriety. In turn, the city’s art scene now evinces the sort of creative energy that was once drew collectors exclusively to New York and Los Angeles.

So, because they beautifully epitomize Houston as a hot zone for world-class artists—and in a nod to their increasingly recognizable and important individual bodies of work, growing in impressive bounds in recent years, with much more on the horizon—Houston magazine has named the prolific and philanthropic Engelstein, 48, and Parazette, 53, its Artists of the Year.

The accomplished couple says they derive great inspiration from the city and, especially, from their own relationship. “Aaron will have a wonderful opportunity, and I’ll get an opportunity,” says the lovely Engelstein, who grew up in Montreal before moving to Florida as a teen. Sporting almost platinum hair and wearing an Indian-print top and white capris, she cuts a confident and colorful figure. “So our careers have been on a catch-up-with-the-other-one track. We’ve both had great opportunities, and we have been able to make ourselves available to each other.”

You don’t have to go much further than their front door—still in Montrose—to begin to glimpse their eclectic lives as Houston art-world originals.

As soon as you enter their home, you find yourself in Engelstein’s buzzworthy, two-year-old in-house Front Gallery. It’s an artist-run exhibition space that shows a diverse roster ranging from Los Angeles painting phenom Kim Dingle to Menil Collection curator Toby Kamps, who flipped the script and showed his own photographs here in the spring. Past the kitchen and living room, there are two airy studios—one upstairs, where Parazette, a trim and good-looking former surf bum from California, designs and paints his canvases, and another one downstairs in which Engelstein draws and sculpts. Scattered around are toys and drawings belonging to Joy, their 8-year-old daughter.

“Their approach is a pretty great merger of art and life,” assesses Kamps. “It’s the very best of that Houston ethos. They’re just doing things, going for it, in their own backyard.”

Although their artwork is interrelated, the couple rarely collaborates directly. Parazette’s eye-popping abstract, often-typographic paintings, generally colorful, evoke precision and technological themes. By contrast, Engelstein’s sensuous free-form sculptures feature alternately billowy and bulbous shapes, toggling in scale between monumental and personal—some as tall as 15 feet, others as short as 15 inches.

Beyond her curatorial efforts at Front Gallery, this year Engelstein has had designs selected for public art installations in Houston and Austin. In the capital city, she is crafting a

permanent monumental sculpture as part of Austin's Art in Public Places program. And in H-Town Engelstein is one of just two local artists who's been selected to create special installations for the Hermann Park centennial celebration coming in 2014. Engelstein also made a splash at this year's Texas Contemporary Arts Fair, where her large-scale inflatable sculptures beguiled visitors at the event entrance.

Meanwhile, for many months Parazette, who was also chosen as Art League Houston's Artist of the Year last year, has been slowing traffic on Main Street with his bright, three-story "Skywriting" mural on the north wall of the Lawndale Art Center, a joint project with fellow painter Daniel Anguilu set to stay on display until Jan. 11. A permanent mural by Parazette—covering the entire interior wall of the renovated UH performance hall in bold orange, blue and red patterns—will be unveiled this winter. And, demonstrating Parazette's reach into the culture beyond Houston, the decor of the happening Living Room lounge at Austin's swank W Hotel includes his playful painting, "Groovy."

"Our friend [the famous Houston-reared artist] Mark Flood said we were 'living the dream,' which was being able to live in Houston, make work in Houston, and then export the work," notes Parazette, who, like Engelstein, has pieces in the permanent collections of both Houston's MFA and the Dallas Museum of Art. The pair has also exhibited in cities including New York, L.A., San Francisco, Atlanta, Chicago and even Madrid. "To be part of a larger consciousness, that's something that is essential if you're going to be satisfied and mature as an artist in this city, and it's something that doesn't happen for everyone."

This blossoming attention has made Engelstein and Parazette two of Houston's most in-demand creatives, and they have made a habit of giving back, to the benefit of local arts-related charities. So while they maintain their own separate local gallery representation—Devin Borden shows Engelstein, while Robert McClain reps Parazette—the pair recently took the somewhat rare step of working together on a couple of high-profile philanthropic projects. In October, the DiverseWorks' ultra-cool Fashion Fete featured a unique Parazette-Engelstein designed dress. They followed that with a one-of-a-kind food-inspired sculpture for the Rice Design Alliance benefit auction; foodie fave Oxheart restaurant was a partner.

To the artists, using their creative gifts and high profile to give back to the community in which they've made both successful careers and a happy family simply makes sense. "As an art couple, we've been lucky," says Engelstein. "Houston has been very good to us."

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