

Chicago Antisocial

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Top: Ryan Shuquem, Elena Kenney, the Walkie-Talkies. Bottom: Benjamin Hirschhoff and his light-up sculptures.

been painted black to contrast with Hirschhoff's campy, animal-themed sculptures, which are made of vacuum-formed sheet plastic and molded from arrangements of chicken wire, rubber chickens, stuffed animals, and doll parts. My favorite is the stuffed body of a dead cat with a smiling rubber doll's head. There are ethereal forests of spindly trees made from sheet rubber carvings and ceramic clay reliefs. For different levels of translucence he sprayed the plastic with enamel paint and installed a low watt fluorescent bulb in the back, though some of them look better with the light off.

Reversible Eye doesn't have regular hours, but you can make an appointment or try stopping by in the afternoon. Shuquem is handling much of the programming and hopes to open a new show every couple of months, occasionally tapping into the connections Kenney has made in her three-plus years in Humboldt Park. Kenney, an aerialist and performance artist—as Serafina the Soggy Songstress she belts out dirges while children dump buckets of tar, feathers, and fetid raw fish on her—will keep a small workshop and practice trapeze in the space. And Steve Walters is moving his print shop, Screwball Press, onto the premises. Shuquem likes the idea of “art being made in a space where art's being shown.”

On Saturday, the second night of the grand opening celebration, no one from the neighborhood walked in the door—at least while I was there. In fact, most of us didn't stay inside for long. The Walkie-Talkies—a very jammy cabaret punk band featuring guys who look like a cross between Prince and Beetlejuice and a woman dressed like a goth bumblebee playing keyboard and singing like Ethel Merman with a distinctly fake eastern European accent—shooed us out the door. By their third dissonant, disjointed tune—this one featuring truly pathetic faux-hick banjo and one-toofed rapping—I'd written them off. But a few people lingered, even as the guitarist donned a Mexican wrestling mask and started doing spoken word, of all things. Even from outside I could hear him yelling “Rise up!”

After I left, Kenney tells me, some kids from down the street came in and took turns on the microphone. “A couple of them were really good,” she says, “but some of them were just 17-year-olds trying to act tough.” The evening ended with a little miscommunication and a skirmish outside that she'd rather not talk about.

“There's lots of opportunity here,” says Shuquem, “but I'm having a confusing time figuring out how to fit into this community. I don't want to just live here. It's just going to be a dry well otherwise.”

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Reversible Eye wants to embrace all of Humboldt Park. Who wants a hug?

By Liz Armstrong

A sweet-faced, leather-skinned, crazy-eyed woman in an inside-out black sweatshirt and dusty-assed black jeans asked all the wallflowers except me and the guy standing next to me to dance. Everyone politely declined but she kept on asking anyway, smiling obliviously like Jack Pumpkinhead.

We were at the grand opening of Reversible Eye, a hardware store-turned-gallery on California in Humboldt Park, and the gypsy punk mini marching band Black Bear Combo was playing in the back. With every phrase saxophonist Doug Abram blurted out, Pumpkinhead clapped her hands and wiggled on her tiptoes. As she jumped up and down a huge scrunchie punctuating the end of her thick blond braid smacked the back of her neck. She got up in the drummer's face, leaned forward, careened back, and whacked the side of an imaginary drum yelling “Bang! Bang!”

Across the room in the storefront window four Latino men sat nodding beside an organ on a small cement stage. When the

band finished they shouted in approval, “la brujeria!”

Just outside a Latina woman with orange Brillo-pad hair and a tattooed neck guarded the open door. She was holding a tiny push broom, and when I stepped out to make a phone call and set my beer on the sidewalk, she told me not to litter.

Neither of the proprietors, Ryan Shuquem and Elena Kenney, knew who these people were. They were just people from the neighborhood hanging out. And that was exactly what they'd hoped for when they opened Reversible Eye.

“If you set yourself apart from people and seclude yourself,” says Kenney, “you put yourself in danger. People start looking at you like you're the other. If you have the respect of your neighborhood, then not only do people want to join in, but they will help protect you. And I want to learn from other people too—that's obvious. Other cultures have new things to offer.”

Shuquem and Kenney moved into the building three months ago, and live in the apartment

upstairs. The building had sat unoccupied since the hardware store closed, and to get the 1,000-square-foot space up and running they first had to clear out a Dumpster's worth of paint cans, fixtures, signs, display walls, old hardware and lumber, dead rats, and an exercise bike. Kenney, who does construction full-time, rehabbed the entire space with a friend: they tore down walls and made new ones, redid the plumbing and wiring, removed and relocated the heating unit, patched up the floor, and cut out a new door. And then she and Shuquem painted the whole thing—including the 70-something-year-old tin ceiling, now a light, shimmering gold.

The two met ten years ago in Los Angeles. Kenney was visiting some mutual friends at Shuquem's house, and he says he introduced himself “by coming up to her and putting her head in my crotch. There was just something about her. I locked into her.”

They had an on-again-off-again relationship in California until Kenney moved here in

1999. Shuquem had moved to the Bay Area, where he joined the dysfunctional, pornographic, hilariously nihilistic performance art troupe Circus Redickless and a chaotic goth punk band called the Phantom Limbs. The band broke up in 2004 so he could move to Chicago. “I was in love with someone here,” he says. “She didn't want to leave because she said the people here were conducive to bringing out the artist in her.”

Their first show at Reversible Eye features some of Shuquem's own work—a bunch of scratchy, spiteful doodles he made last spring while working on the phone as a telemarketer—and sculptures by Benjamin Hirschhoff, who lives in Seattle and is in the graduate ceramic arts program at the University of Washington. He and Shuquem met in 1996 when Shuquem's band, Boy Scouts of Annihilation, played a show in the Bay Area. “He was naked on the ground having seizures,” says Hirschhoff, “and I thought, I gotta go meet that guy.”

The walls of the gallery have

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3401 N. Rockwell

Central Location

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(2 blks east of Kennedy
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Materials Accepted

TVs, Computers, Cell
Phones, Video Games,
Pagers, Stereos, Air
Conditioners, Gas Cans,
Eyeglasses, Small Electronic
Kitchen Appliances and
Oil-Based Paints

Materials Accepted

TVs, Computers, Cell
Phones, Video Games,
Pagers, Stereos, Air
Conditioners, Gas Cans,
Eyeglasses, Small Electronic
Kitchen Appliances, Oil-
Based Paints, Mercury,
Anti-Freeze, Light Bulbs,
Fluorescent Lamp Bulbs,
Motor Oil, Old Gasoline,
Batteries (Car and Household),
Aerosols, Herbicides,
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Conditioners, Gas Cans,
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