

A Conversation Ethel Shipton on Creativity, Resilience & Building Community

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*This article is part of a series of pieces celebrating Glasstire's 25th anniversary. To see other stories from this series, go [here \(https://glasstire.com/tag/Glasstire-25/\)](https://glasstire.com/tag/Glasstire-25/). To see pieces from the month of February, around the theme *Early Sightings: Before They Were Big*, go [here \(https://glasstire.com/tag/glasstire-25-early-sightings/\)](https://glasstire.com/tag/glasstire-25-early-sightings/).*

Ethel Shipton was born and raised in Laredo, Texas. She received a BFA from the University of Texas at Austin in 1989. Shipton worked for the Texas House of Representatives as a photographer for more than eight years. She lived and worked in Mexico City in 1990 and 1992, and then returned to Texas, settling down in San Antonio. Currently she is the Executive Director of Sala Diaz and Lead Preparator and Facilities Manager at Ruby City.

Exploring moments of everyday life, Shipton's practice encompasses painting, installation, photography, and text. Her work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions at venues across Texas and beyond, including the Inaugural Exhibition of Ruby City, Artpace, the McNay Art Museum, and Sala Diaz in San Antonio; the McKinney Contemporary Art Center in Dallas; and The Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Shipton was also a 2017 participant in the Berlin Residency Program, a partnership between Blue Star Contemporary and Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, Germany. In 2023, Shipton had a solo exhibition, *Ethel Shipton: Los Dos Laredos y Más*, in her hometown at the Laredo Center for

the Arts. Her recent group exhibitions include *Regarding Ruscha* at the McNay, *Stitch in Time* at Women and Their Work in Austin, *Piecework* at the Dallas Center for Contemporary Art, *Latinx Art: Transcending Borders* at Octavia Art Gallery in Houston, and *Analia Segal and Ethel Shipton: Feminizing forms* at Finesilver Gallery in San Antonio.

Recently, I spoke with Shipton about her artistic practice and her work as an arts professional in San Antonio. This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.



Ethel Shipton

Colette Copeland (CC): You've been a force in San Antonio's art community for nearly 30 years. As Glasstire celebrates its 25th anniversary, we're honoring your ongoing work and legacy. I've visited San Antonio annually for the past five years, and you were among the first to welcome me – introducing me to artists who later became collaborators and friends. That warmth feels core to San Antonio's art culture. What do you think makes it so, and how have you tried to nurture that culture through your own practice and collaborations?

Ethel Shipton (ES): San Antonio, as I've known it, has always been a place where artist creatives can find their people to make things happen. I've also found it's where ideas are exchanged and projects come together as collaborations. For example, you get a phone call, and someone asks if you know anyone who can help with sound editing. You give the caller a name and number, and before you know it, these two people are working together on a new work. Overall, people here don't really say "NO."

CC: In the late 1990s, you founded the artist-run space **The Project Room**. What need did it address in San Antonio at the time, and how would you describe its mission and curatorial vision – especially in relation to local artists?

ES: I was new in town, and the space became available in the Blue Star Arts Complex, which had affordable spaces for artists. The Project Room allowed me to meet people and to jump feet first into the community. The mission was to provide space for artists to create a one-night-only exhibition to do whatever they wanted. It allowed people to experiment and was also a space to create performance artwork. The Project Room was open for three years, from 1998 to 2000.

Here's how The Project Room came to be: a table of people were eating and drinking at the Liberty Bar and I was talking about this idea of one-night exhibitions in my newly acquired studio at Blue Star. My vision was to have a different curator for each year. Artists Andréa Caillouet and Callida Borgnino right away said yes and that's how The Project Room started.

Ace in the hole (in the wall)

First Friday experiments at The Project Room

BY JOHN EWING

Tucked into a quiet strip of residential lofts and artist studios, The Project Room hides behind Building B at the Blue Star Arts Complex. On any given First Friday, this small exhibition venue might be the last stop revellers stumble upon as they wander toward their cars. For a tight-knit group of serious, young artists, however, The Project Room is often the most eagerly anticipated destination on the First Friday map.

Co-founded by Ethel Shipton and Tyler Linton in 1998, The Project Room was conceived as a series of one-night-only events over a three-year span. For artists who agree to participate, the venue provides unconditional use of Shipton's studio to surprise an audience made up mostly of peers, a challenge consistently surmounted for the past two years. With the work of UTSA student Randy Wallace, The Project Room begins its third and final year this First Friday.

"For me, it's all about conversation and communication," says Ethel Shipton, a Laredo native who studied art at UT Austin and relocated to San Antonio in 1997. Shipton considers The Project Room her three-year collaboration with a select cadre of San Antonio's brash-est and most active contemporary artists. By her design, the collaboration has had three specific phases: grassroots organizing, the visual art itself, and a forthcoming multi-volume document of the community experiment. "We decided to do it 'one-night-only' so that people would have to communicate in a more spontaneous and immediate way," Shipton explains. "What excites me most is how many artists use The Project Room as a chance to experiment. They move away from what they think they should be doing."

Tyler Linton met Shipton when both were working at the San Antonio Museum of Art. A graduate from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Linton was anxious to participate in the San Antonio arts community and supported Shipton's idea for an experimental art space. "It's a different experience for both artist and audience," says Linton. "For some, it's hard to put aside notions of what an exhibition is, or what a gallery is. A few artists have responded exactly as we hoped by doing something on the spot, specifically reacting to the space and the idea that it is only going to be for one night. Others have done it more traditionally by making a few things outside the space and bringing them in to hang on the walls." Linton focuses on producing the printed announcements for Project Room openings; according to Linton, the announcements are an additional opportunity for the artists to extend and personalize their experiments, "but some people get that more than others, just as some have gotten the idea of The Project Room



Andria Caillouet and Ethel Shipton, outside The Project Room studio and gallery space

more than others."

Hashed out over a table at Liberty Bar, the original plans for The Project Room picked the interest of artists Collada Borgnino and Andria Caillouet. A transplant from San Jose, California, Borgnino at one time rented The Project Room studio herself, and she welcomed the invitation to direct its second year. Making her choices from a specific "family of artists," Borgnino chose locals from the venue's small, dedicated following. Unabashedly "by, of, and for artists," The Project Room under Borgnino continued to offer an alternative to commercial galleries and large institutions. "It's about fun, not being so serious," says Borgnino, who credits the space with providing a pressure-free environment where artists "take risks in front of their peers." Although several participants resisted the single-viewing format, prompting a second-year "information slush" for artists, Borgnino claims the formula is a success. "One night helps keep the work from being too overdone," Borgnino comments. "The artist doesn't get so caught up in the art, which makes it easier to not be so everlasting about it. They're prepared to get the idea across in a night."

While a student at UTSA, New Orleans

native Caillouet presented what could be called a model Project Room exhibit. Entitled "Lick," her multi-color grid was constructed from small rectangles of either chocolate or soap, each an indistinguishable "surprise" for viewers to take as souvenirs from an exhibition that changed by the minute. Like Borgnino, Caillouet agreed to direct The Project Room's third year as a way to support artists outside the institutional or commercial framework. Her goal is to alternate San Antonio artists with participants from other Texas cities. "I would like to have a mix," she enthuses. "It would be nice for everyone, and me personally, to get some new people in here; we know what we're doing!" She echoes the oft-heard criticism that an "incestuous" San Antonio art scene suffers from a dearth of new ideas.

Naysayers aside, the proliferation of artist-run spaces in San Antonio is a remarkable challenge to a governmental vote of "no confidence." The Project Room and its cousins (e.g. Sala Diaz, Cactus Bra, Three Walls, Gas Hall, and others) persevere without budgets or funding. A commitment to art in these circles isn't lip service; it comes out of the pockets of the

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"Ace in the hole (in the wall): First Friday experiments at The Project Room" by John Ewing, *San Antonio Current*

CC: In a recent [Art Dirt](#) episode Brandon Zech and Glasstire founder Rainey Knudson, I learned that Rainey's print publication, *Canvas*, covered The Project Room alongside other artist-run spaces. How would you characterize the art writing in San Antonio then, and what impact did that coverage have on The Project Room and the broader DIY scene?

ES: We had some good writers here at the *San Antonio Express-News* and the *San Antonio Current*.

Like *Art Papers*, we had a local art magazine *Voices of Art*, but it was helpful to have recognition from outside San Antonio. And then of course when *Canvas* ended, Rainey started *Glasstire*.



Ethel Shipton, "You Are Here," 1997

CC: Could you describe your early work in San Antonio — especially the text benches and how they evolved from photographs into sculptural “light paintings”? You’ve also mentioned giveaways. What was your philosophy behind “free art,” and how did those projects shape community engagement?

ES: I had a few early exhibitions in San Antonio — one at House Space run by Jesse Amando and Rebecca Holland. In the *You Are Here* exhibition, I chose five bus benches around the city and photographed what was just behind them. I printed the images in black and white and

went out early one morning with a friend, wearing yellow vests and hard hats. We wheatpasted the images to the benches and then pasted a yellow square sign that read “YOU ARE HERE” in the right corner of the image.



Installation images of works by Ethel Shipton, 1997

CC: It’s interesting that the images bring awareness to nonspaces or spaces that one might not notice, especially if they are sitting on the benches. The declaration of **YOU ARE HERE** further makes people aware of their bodies in the space while playfully drawing attention to the bus stations as a site of waiting, a site of rest, and a site of pre- or post-labor.

ES: A year later I made five metal and acrylic benches of different colors. The words “**YOU ARE HERE**” were engraved on each bench. I had key chains with the same text made as a free giveaway for visitors to the gallery. I did the free giveaway one other time for an exhibition at Sala Diaz entitled *CHOICE*. The show included soft sculptures made of upholstered vinyl with arrows on them. Small, round paperweights were piled in the corner of the gallery and were given away to visitors. The idea behind the giveaways was that art is for everyone.



Ethel Shipton, "Choices," 2020

CC: I love the mantra that art is for everyone and it is such a generous gift to give art back to the community. It also must be rewarding to know that people have kept and cherished these keepsakes for so many years.

Your work often deploys subtle, subversive humor through text and image. As Hills Snyder noted in his [2019 Glasstire review](#) (it addresses "the obvious that so often goes unnoticed."

What role does text play in your practice, and how does your approach shift when you're working with found text in the landscape versus text you create?

ES: *Los Dos Laredos* is a work that includes a photograph of a road sign about 40 miles outside of Laredo and it shows a mile difference between the two cities and the two countries. The sign reads “Laredo 38 miles” and “Nuevo Laredo 39 miles.” Yet the government makes that mile difference so much bigger. As for *Cambio/Change*, that was made in early 2020 and it became much more meaningful as 2020 unfolded and continues to speak to the need for cambio.



Ethel Shipton, "Dos Laredos," 2014, screenprint



Ethel Shipton, "Cambio/Change," 2020

CC: I find both works very meaningful for different reasons. *Los Dos Laredos* is about immigration and how an arbitrary geographic boundary can carry so much socio-political weight. It speaks to who has power and who does not. In *Cambio/Change*, you used the Coca-Cola font, which to me references the power of consumerism and corporate greed.

Over the past 25 years, how has your work evolved? Which themes or visual strategies have remained constant, and what has changed?

ES: Some things are constant, particularly the way I work. I react to the ideas, my environment, and the cultural and political [environment], etc. For example, I was awarded a three-month Berlin Residency through The Contemporary at Blue Star in 2017 and for the three months I walked the city and found things in the street that spoke to me. This became a full body of work.

Some of the images I photographed included a sign pasted to the side of a building that read “LEAVE TRACES” and another that was stenciled on the side of an electrical box that read “Be careful with each other so we can be dangerous together.”



Sala Diaz

CC: Let’s talk about Sala Diaz, now approaching 30 years. As a nonprofit “house” gallery in San Antonio, it has long provided a space for artists to experiment in ways that traditional institutions often can’t. You’ve been involved since you arrived in San Antonio and have served as Executive Director since 2020. What distinguishes Sala Diaz from other nonprofits? What is the craziest story about an art installation/exhibition that you can share?

ES: Sala Diaz has always been a place for people to gather and exchange ideas, possibilities, collaborations, and community fellowship. For 20 years, Hills Snyder was the Director of Sala Diaz. Hills set the tone and spirit of this wonderful space. Thank you, Hills.

It's also a space where you can install a see-saw through a wall (artist Judith Cortell) and The Art Guys built a maze through the entire space that visitors had to crawl through. Again, there aren't a lot of "NO's" in San Antonio. The main rule is for the artist to return the space as they found it.



Ethel Shipton standing with a photograph of her by Celia Álvarez Muñoz, at Ruby City

CC: At Ruby City, you serve as Lead Preparator and Facilities Manager. How do you guard against burnout and prioritize time for yourself and for creative studio work?

ES: Every aspect of my world is art and that feeds me. In my day job at Ruby City I get to be part of a legacy left to us by Linda Pace, and I work with amazing people. Elyse Gonzales, the Director of Ruby City, is open to ideas and runs the space with creativity and grace. And my other jobs are Sala Diaz and the making/creating of my own work. All these things inform my work.

CC: What are you working on now? And what are you most excited about for 2026?

ES: Working on some new prints. 2026 — Let's see what comes — more gathering of people and ideas.