

# artHOUSTON

VISUAL ARTS, CULTURE, REVIEWS





# DEBORAH COLTON GALLERY

BY JOHN BERNHARD

Left:  
Deborah Colton  
posing during the  
fall group show  
*20 in 2020*. The  
work behind is by  
Amita Bhatt.

Right clockwise  
from top:  
The spheres on  
the outside of  
Deborah Colton  
Gallery say  
"Welcome" in  
Braille.  
Photo by John  
Bernhard

Installation  
during Amita  
Bhatt's solo  
exhibition  
*Between Light  
and Shadow*,  
2019

Harif Guzman's  
solo exhibition  
*Dying to Live*,  
2013  
Photos  
courtesy of  
Deborah Colton  
Gallery

**JOHN BERNHARD:** Tell us about yourself. I read that you were interested in art at an early age.

**DEBORAH COLTON:** I have always been surrounded by art. My earliest memories are my mother having many canvases in the room that was her studio and my playroom. I loved watching her paint. On my mother's maternal side were a long line of artists. My Danish great grandfather's father had an advertising business in London in the 1800's. I have some of the

original lithographs that he made the printed ads from. My great grandfather worked there and then came to the United States and settled in NYC where he was a commercial fashion artist. He married my Danish great grandmother at the Little Church Around the Corner in 1905 in NYC, a church that embraced arts and artists. My Danish grandmother, who I was always closed to and lived until almost 100, grew up in NYC and was a fashion illustrations artist for Buttericks. She and my grandfather were also

surrounded by the art world in NYC, living in Greenwich Village on Cherry Lane in the same building as Edna St. Vincent Millay. My grandparents eventually moved to a New York commuter town in New Jersey for their children, but they kept their artist studios on the third floor of their home, even though my grandfather worked on Wall Street. It was fun to go upstairs and explore their studios as a kid.

Through my younger years, I was always going to NYC with my parents, and my mother and I went to visit the







museums often. My mother nurtured my creativity, and through high school I wanted to be an artist. But my dad, an educator, wanted me to go into business instead. So, my undergraduate degree is a BS in Business Administration – Marketing Management, since I felt marketing was at least creative. I worked in the corporate world after college and met great success there being a top national account sales producer for 3M Company and then getting promoted to manage the Houston, Texas sales branch, and then a special product launch assignment out of NYC. All through that though, I was taking as many art classes as possible since art was still my real passion. After my husband and young family moved to Asia for my husband's career, I had the chance to get back in the arts again. I started my business in 1998 while still living in Asia. We moved back to Houston in 2000. The rest is the gallery's history.

**JB:** You are reaching your twentieth anniversary with your gallery. Can you reflect on your beginning?

**DC:** The very beginning was in Bangkok, Thailand around 1997. At first, I was mainly a supporter of many of the most prominent artists of Thailand, many of whom were Professors and Deans at the Fine Arts University that is affiliated with His Majesty the King in Bangkok. These artists gave me a good education of their artistic processes and taught me the importance of the concepts of their art. I started by bringing their artist portfolios to NYC during my home-leaves in the summers and presenting their work to many art institutions and museums. I worked the region of Asia, going to China often,

Tokyo and Singapore. Things were starting to brew in the arts during this time there, and it was wonderful to be a part of it. The Thai artists then convinced me that with my business background of marketing, sales, and product launches, that I would make a great gallerist, since artists depend on an income to be able to continue to be full time artists. So, when I came back to the United States, my first show was "Thai Expressions in the City" which I did to support the Asia Society - Houston by creating an awareness of Asian Art to start the process of fundraising for their new building. I curated the show in Bangkok while still living there and then put all the work on a ship to Houston. Before this, Houston had seen very little Asian contemporary art. We did this in Two Allen Center in conjunction with Consular Forum 2000 Honoring Thailand. Thereafter, I continued with major Asian art shows in Two Allen Center for three years to help support the Asia Society and with Consul General offices: 2001 with China and 2002 with the Asia Cultural Exchange of Japan. In the meantime, I was organizing exhibitions and showing Asian art at art fairs and art institutions in LA, San Francisco, and Seattle.

There was a Swiss-Italian photographer out of Bali who I supported when I lived in Bangkok. He was connected to the whole early 80's New York art scene. I had no idea that he had promoted me so much with his art colleagues in NYC. When I finally found a unique space where I wanted to open a gallery, I started with art from that cool time in New York. It went with a warehouse gallery in an old artist studio building and was an instant success. I went back into showing Asian artist again after Deborah Colton Gallery

became known as more of an international gallery, not just Asian art.

**JB:** In the early 2000's you had your gallery located on Summer Street before the Sawyer Yard craze, which has now become one of the largest artist campus in the United States. Do you miss that location?

**DC:** I have great memories of going into that dilapidated part of town in 2002 with the view of David Addickes president heads and the downtown skyline out of our third-floor windows, and of all of our happenings. When I moved there, Winter Street was in terrible shape and looked like it would be torn down. Other galleries and collectors would tell me, "Deborah, you can't have a gallery there. No one would go there". But I knew if I had good enough exhibitions, everyone would come. And they did. Our first show, which opened during FotoFest, had over 800 people came through that evening. We had close to 1,000 people at our fall - 2004 exhibition "Camp Lucky". Art enthusiast from all over the city would go up the blue fire escape stairs to fill the whole third floor. There were huge happenings and people still tell me that the shows and having a major warehouse type gallery in that part of town in 2003 to 2008 showing Jenny Holzer, Matthew Barney, Yoko Ono, Joseph Kosuth, video, scientific and cutting-edge art from all over the world, helped make them think "that Houston was cool".

I really don't miss it though. I was delighted to start the revitalization there, by also helping John Deal get Winter Street going, after he saw what was happening at my openings. I stayed around when Spring Street





Studios was being rebuilt and until we had protected the area as a First Ward Arts District. When it started getting more commercial and developed in the area though, I was ready to move on. I think it's great what has happened there, and I'm proud to have been a part of that.

**JB:** Over the years you have produced many shows. What exhibition are you proudest of and what were some of the highlights?

**DC:** That's hard to say since we put a lot of effort and love into every exhibition. Many of our first shows educated people about the beginnings of the digital art movement and introducing video to the city, around the same time the Aurora Picture Show was founded also. Introducing Jonas Mekas to Houston in 2005 was fun. Our "WORD" show of 2006 was a great show. "WORD" not only had a stellar group of famous conceptual and Fluxus artist, but we also introduced a huge public artwork IMAGINE PEACE of Yoko Ono on 145 going into downtown Houston that all the newscasters covered, and the artwork took on a life of its own. In terms of public space installations, in 2007 we had a sculpture, "Illuminations" on the Rothko Chapel grounds. 2007 and 2008 was at the heartbeat of the Chinese contemporary art movement and we had several exhibitions with some of the most talked about artists from China then. 2008 we started showing artists from the Middle East – Arab world, 2012 we started showing artists from Russia. Starting around 2014 we wanted to launch the theme that Houston had an important art history, by kicking off our "Houston Foundations Series" of exhibitions and

lectures. Our shows addressing art, science, and technology, like Suzanne Anker's exhibitions, are important in terms of our future as a human race on earth. Shows like "Visions" in 2017 addressed universal spirituality. The arts can make a major impact in creating an awareness of issues that affect us. I have always used the gallery as a forum for artists that believe that their work can help shift the direction of the public for the positive.

**JB:** What do you expect from the relationship you have with your represented artists?

**DC:** I like to establish a feeling of trust and partnership. The relationships that have lasted for over 20 years that I have are based on a deep mutual respect with open communications and team playing. This is how I have been the most successful for artist in helping their careers be launched nationally and their prices and artwork respected.

**JB:** Can you tell us about your new "Artist S & S Project"?

**DC:** This stands for "Artist Solo & Studio" and we are excited about this project, both for the community and the artist that is chosen each year. Our current gallery space started as the artist studio of Molly Gochman, who designed the building with the white convex and concave sphere on the outside of the building, which say "Welcome" in Braille. We want to embrace this original vision, just like we did in our old gallery space on Summer Street being in an artist studio building. Thus, during the summer, I want to be able to support an emerging

artist, with giving them a chance to have a solo exhibition in the main gallery and set up an installation in the back half of the gallery as their working studio. Artist Grayson Chandler will launch this new program with his exhibition "IN VIA" this summer. This gives both the artist and the community a chance to visualize what happens in an artist's studio and at a gallery.

**JB:** You are the Vice-President of the Houston Art Gallery Association. What are the vision and the goals of the association for 2022?

**DC:** Houston is a vibrant and exciting international city, rich in arts and culture that's also proud of its diversity. HAGA, the Houston Art Gallery Association, is comprised of some of the finest art galleries in Houston, each with their own distinct programming.

HAGA will be hosting a city-wide event, opening up all of our member galleries to celebrate our artists the first weekend of April. We feel that collectively we can help reveal the strength of the arts in Houston and can continue to support each other.

**JB:** What's next, any future plans, a big event coming up?

**DC:** One that I can start to talk about is a monumental sculpture by our Chinese artists, The Gao Brothers, coming from the Vancouver Biennale to San Antonio this spring. This is going to make a big splash there, really introducing the city to provocative, contemporary Asian Art. We have several other large projects brewing: all good to help Texas to become one of the important States of the Arts.