

[FRESH ARTS PODCAST] EPISODE 2: SHOULD I OR SHOULDN'T I MOVE TO ANOTHER CITY FOR ITS ART SCENE?

This is transcript of Episode 2: "Should I or Shouldn't I Move to another city for its art scene" from the Fresh Arts Podcast Should I or Shouldn't I, hosted by Reyes Ramirez, which was published on October 21, 2020 featuring GONZO247 and Ashley DeHoyos.

Reyes:

Hello, and welcome to "Should I or Shouldn't I," a Fresh Arts podcast hosted by me, Reyes Ramirez, where we explore the decisions artists make every day to succeed in their creative practice. Today we're asking should I or shouldn't I move to another city for its art scene? We have Houston artist GONZO247, and DiverseWorks curator Ashley DeHoyos, to discuss. Hello, you two.

Ashley:

Hi.

GONZO:

Howdy.

Reyes:

Yo. Yeah, so, Ashley, do you wanna give, like, a quick, brief introduction to yourself?

Ashley:

Yeah, so I'm Ashley DeHoyos. I work at DiverseWorks, I'm the curator. I've been back in Houston for about two years. I have my master's in fine arts and curatorial practice from Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore, and my bachelor's degree at Sam Houston State University in photography. So born and raised Texan, really excited to be on this call. My trip away was really informative.

Reyes:

GONZO, please.

GONZO:

So I'm GONZO247. I am a local artist here in the city of Houston, born and raised. Grew up in the east side of downtown. First-generation Texican, and- you know, just made it a mission early on in my life to really try to usher in this thing called graffiti and street art in the city.

Ashley:

Awesome.

Reyes:

Absolutely. So, thank you, you two, for coming on. So before I ask the first question, I just wanna give, like, a quick disclaimer about, like, the formulation of this question. I think it's obviously a very

complex kinda decision and issue to think about, and it's one I certainly made one for myself. I am born and raised in Houston, did my undergrad at University of Houston, but then for my MFA in creative writing, I lived a little bit in San Marcos 'cause I went to Texas State University, and then I lived a little bit in Austin, just 'cause the small town was not working for me. And then Austin is a whole different game. But we can get into that later. But I guess one thing that I wanna square away is the idea of an art scene, right. What does that mean. And so, Ashley, can you talk a bit about, when someone says, "Think about a city's art scene," what do you think people mean, and what do you define that as?

Ashley:

Yeah, when I think somebody talks about, like, Houston's art scene, they're really looking for the culture, the life, the pulse of the city. You know, where do you go to eat, where do you go to experience things. You know, it's performance, it's visual, sound, you know, all those components go into an art scene, and I think that feed a creative community. Because we're all feeding off of each other, literally. And so, you know, when we talk about a city's art scene, we're really talking about, I think our grassroots, on the ground level of, like, how different microcosms of mediums and cultures and backgrounds really come together to create a life for the city.

GONZO:

Yeah, I'll mirror that and say that I also agree, when people think of arts, it's all-encompassing. And also I think, now more than ever, a lotta people are multi-disciplinary. So they might be a visual artist but also do dance and, you know, maybe poetry. And so I think there's some lines that get crossed in the creative field. And so it really, with more people having also more access to technology and being able to do different things, that term art scene I think can go a million different ways.

Ashley:

Definitely.

Reyes:

Yeah, and I think there's also some kind of, like, stuff around the term art scene, right. 'Cause I think when some people talk about art scene, they mean, like, funding, right. Whether or not a city has a funding for its arts, right. Or whether it has institutions, right. Whether it be, like, a non-profit gallery or a big one or smaller galleries, or what have you. There's just so many ways to define that. And I guess Ashley, like seeing as, you know, you help with, like, things like Idea Fund and all those things, how do you suppose, like, those things go into defining what an art scene is, right. Whether or not a city supports an art scene, or an institution, or like you said, grassroots.

Ashley:

Yeah. Well I think that the organizations and the funding definitely is a part of the art culture. I think that there are art scenes that are out there that don't have support, that are really, you know, prevalent on their own in terms of how they're creating space for each other and questioning what art is, that flourish. So you don't necessarily have to have funding and/or institutions to validate your work. Really I think the art scene is just having creative communities together and in dialogue, and, you know, like I said, feeding off each other, you know, through their practices or conversations. And it's interesting, you know, especially thinking about living in different cities, and how different cities operate, and how their art scenes will function, or that will go against different types of formalities. So, yeah. And GONZO, I don't know what you think about that.

GONZO:

So yeah, so for me, like, growing up, my whole introduction to what is considered art was through graffiti and graffiti writing. And so back in my days, I didn't know anything about the Houston arts scene whatsoever. I didn't even know there was this thing called an art scene in Houston. All I knew, like you were saying, were my counterparts and the people that I ran with who were doing the same type of art, I guess. And so for us, what we considered the art scene were all the other graffiti writers and all the walls that we painted at. And then eventually when we started having these crazy underground warehouse art parties, we thought that was the art scene. It wasn't until I really started researching and trying to find, you know, just more people out there. You know, I ran across DiverseWorks. I ran across MotherDog. And then that's when I realized, oh, there's this bigger thing going on. And so I think there's levels to it. So you have everything from the grassroots all the way up to, you know, to the fine art galleries. So that there's that wide spread. But for us, everything was out of our pocket. We did it for the love of it. And so we weren't necessarily looking to get funded. We were just out there to make somethin' happen.

Ashley:

Yeah, yeah. I think those are some of the best moments, too, is when people just get together and do stuff, and then whatever happens happens. And so I think that's what I'm thinking of whenever we think about an art scene. It's just creative people making shit happen, you know?

Reyes:

Yeah, yeah. And I guess it's a question that's very much, I guess, caught up in, like, this idea of opportunity, right. In regards to, like, what exists versus what can be made. And so like for me, I guess I'm speaking from, like, the background of a writer, like a creative writer, and just kind of like, kind of this may segue into this next

question that I have, but for me as a writer, Houston, I love Houston. Houston's my jam. I write about Houston. I love writing in Houston. But I guess kinda one thing is that, like, there are some publishing, there are some presses in Houston, but not really as many as, let's say, in New York, right. And so like, that's often, like, a thing some people might say to a writer in Houston. They'd be like, "Oh no, go to New York, "New York is, like, where all the publishing houses "and all, like, the big presses are." Kind of like one would advise maybe an actor to like, "Oh yeah, go live in LA." You know, "That's where all the movies are made." And sure, like, you can stay in Houston and make movies, but it's probably not gonna be, I don't know, I could be wrong about that, but, like, how plentiful those opportunities are. But I think kind of when we get down to this question, I think it's, one, looking at what makes Houston unique in its art community and what's possible, really. And so Ashley, you having lived in different and organizing different cities, whether it's been Huntsville, right, and Baltimore, what, in your estimation, has made Houston unique in the arts?

Ashley:

I mean, Houston is just, it's an interesting city. I think its geography, it sets a lotta cities apart. Our dense population, you know, the fact that we're really multicultural. We also have this really complex history with Mexico and the way, like, we identify as Texans, Mexican Americans, and our relationship to the border, even though we're really north of it. There's still those residuals that show up, you know, in terms of, like right now, I'm trying to start a project and thinking about the indigenous identity and how tangled that is here in Houston. So there's a lotta stuff because of our history that really hasn't been explored, which is really interesting to me. I think because we're a Gulf city and that we're also impacted by hurricanes, there's a lot of resilience and a lot of adaptive ability and flexibility in the ways that we, you know, wanna work, and how we collaborate and how we support each other. And I think there's something that's really interesting too, where, like, the artists here, you know, especially since I've returned back, really don't like to define themselves by boxes. They really wanna stay very interdisciplinary, they want to be able to, like, move in between different institutions and in different mediums and movements. And I think that that's really interesting to see how fluid the city is as well.

Reyes:

Yeah, GONZO, and not to kinda, again, like not to box you in, 'cause I mean, you have experience with art in Norway, if I'm reading your CV right, like in Norway, and Mexico, and Dallas. And so kind of like, in your experience, what makes Houston unique in its art community?

GONZO:

I mean, there's a lotta great things I can say about this city, but I

think what makes it unique, at least from my perspective and from my experiences, has been the willingness for artists to help other artists. You know, even like, you know, sometimes I get calls that people are looking, like, "Hey, do you know a place where I can," you know, "I need some space to do this thing." Or, "What's a good lead on these materials." And also, like, part of the reason that we developed the HUE Mural Festival was to be able to work with other artists. Whether they were local, regional, you know, national, international, but bring 'em all to Houston and give those opportunities, you know, to give more people platforms to paint their murals. But I think Houston is, it's a friendly place. I think it comes with the territory of living here. And again, from my experience, it's always been more of a how can we help each other. And as Ashley was saying, the resilience of the people coming together, you know, for the cause of the art scene.

Reyes:

Yeah, I will say, I think that's, I'm always surprised. And I mean, this may sound bad coming from an arts administrator, but I'm always, like, just surprised every day of, like, who I don't know. And in some ways, like, you know, cities can be small in their own ways, but they can be so vast and unknowable. And I think Houston kinda, for me, embodies that. Where it's like, yeah, I can run into people I know all the time, you know, everywhere, and talk to them. But it's also like, yo, you've been practicing here for like 10 years? How have I not known you up to this point? I think there is kind of like that really interesting dynamic of unknowability of Houston, of such grand city, and whether or not you're ever gonna really get to know it. And that combined with, and this is gonna segue into my next question, I swear this has a purpose, but like, this city's kind of unknowability and, like, the way that the zoning, and the way it's structured, organizing. Organizing things in Houston I think presents kind of its own interesting dilemma, in both good and bad ways. So like, Ashley, in your experience, I know you've curated shows in Huntsville. I'm sure you've done many things in Baltimore. And then here in Houston, you know, you work with DiverseWorks, you've curated shows here. You've also worked with, like, Common Field, and all that great stuff. What has been your experience in kinda organizing events and arts happenings here in Houston that you've liked or maybe you felt was different?

Ashley:

I think one of the things that's really interesting that, after coming from Baltimore, which is a heavy city that's rooted in social practice and social justice, is realizing that there's a lotta conversations that I was having and that haven't really happened here in Houston just yet. Sort of everybody's kind of on the cusp of moving towards, and where in Baltimore that was, so they're maybe like a year ahead in some conversations and content. And so that was something that has been really interesting in terms of exploring and also thinking about

my own practice as a curator and how I'm organizing, is like where I will enter the conversation. Because some conversations I may have already had the beginning stages, but I have to back up for the audience so that we can really talk about some of the complexities, you know, before I go back to where I was when I was in Baltimore. And I think a lotta that is just because of geography, culture, and, you know, it's not bad, it's just we're in different scenes and have different ethos.

Reyes:

Yeah, maybe could you provide an example of that? Of like maybe something that like, 'cause I agree with you, I think there are some conversations in Houston that, you know, haven't been had, but in other ways have been had. So do you have, like, an example of that?

Ashley:

One of the biggest examples that I noticed really off the bat was the term Latinx, and how in Baltimore, Latinx was a conversation that was really started in 2015, 2016. And then when I moved back to Houston in 2018, Latino Art Now! was being developed. And so that was a major conversation within that development too, is like, do we use Latinx, do we use Latino. It was some of the first times that I noticed that people were having that conversation, I thought was really interesting.

Reyes:

I agree with you, that was actually really interesting. And I will say, just kind of like, a little bit of background on me, like, yeah, I am Mexican American, but I'm also Salvadoran American. And I think it's a very interesting kind of, like, ground, where there's so many, like, Central American artists in Houston. And it's kind of like, yeah, how do we build that also, like, you know, quote unquote scene. And kind of like seeing how that mixes with, like, the historically, like, Mexican American presence, and all that good stuff. I think that's a great point. GONZO, yeah, same question, I suppose. As an organizer yourself, you know, with Aerosol Warfare, the Graffiti and Street Art Museum of Texas, the Houston Urban Experience, HUE, what's been your experience of organizing in Houston? What's made that particular?

GONZO:

I think for me, and again, speaking from my experiences from the early days, even like I said earlier, when we were just a bunch of, you know, crazy artists, that we would just come together on our own for the common cause of trying to make something happen with, you know, spray paint oriented artwork. And then that rolling into, you know, organizing on a bigger level with, you know, big warehouse events, to the point where then we turned that Aerosol Warfare into an actual gallery space and organizing, you know, exhibitions with, again, local young graffiti writers, and we pace artists and street artists, and

really just kinda growing from there. But I think there is a lack of organization, in a sense that, at least, I think there could be more people organizing more things to benefit more people. Kinda keep that cycle going. In my opinion, and maybe it's because of the pandemic and these current situations, but I'm not really seeing people saying I'm gonna take it upon myself to cultivate this whatever for the benefit of the larger audience, versus just I'm in it for me and I'm only gonna worry about me and whatever I do.

Reyes:

Yeah, I will say that, so I lived a little bit in Austin. And ultimately that city wasn't for me. And we can get into kind of, like, other things, like facets of what makes, like, let's say an art scene or a city habitable by certain arts. But for me, I think one thing that I really appreciated 'bout Austin was seeing kind of how mixed everything was in regards to the arts. Like, there I'd see, like, regular readings happening in, like, art galleries, or, like, artists and poets were always responding to each other. You know, and that might be because, like, a lotta the institutions are concentrated. Where like, you have Mexic-Arte Museum right down the street from their contemporary museum, right down the street from, you know, other spaces, and UT, and they're all, like, really packed next to each other. But Houston's way more spread out than that. And, you know, there's pros and cons to that. But I suppose, like, going into that, what do you think Houston could learn from other cities in regards to, like, what's happening in Houston, what's not happening in Houston, what Houston could learn from other cities, Ashley.

Ashley:

I'm gonna pass this one to GONZO, 'cause I need to think about it.

Reyes:

Fair enough.

GONZO:

So, it's gonna be a kind of a long way around to answer the question. So bear with me.

Reyes:

It's all good.

GONZO:

And I'll try to make this really brief. Touching back on a point you said earlier, as far as like, you know, you go to another city, what's the deal with that. So for me as a young graffiti writer, as soon as anyone found out I was, you know, into graffiti, that's the first thing they would say. "Yo, you gotta go to New York," or, "You gotta go to LA, "you gotta go to all these to the cities, "and that's kinda what the scene's at." I never really had either the opportunity or the means to even think about leaving Houston. But at the same time, I

kept thinking to myself, and this is something I've told other people when they're looking to move for their craft. And what I say is, you know, and I'll use myself as an example. Why, as a graffiti writer, am I gonna go to New York where the area is already saturated with a million other people doing the same thing that I'm doing? And if I gotta go there, I gotta work a thousand times harder just to get seen. Why don't I do work a thousand times harder here in Houston and really blow it up, right? And so I tell people, like, if you feel you have to leave for your craft, that's fine. But why don't you work, you know, that same amount here, because if there's no competition or little competition, then you have a easier way to really bubble up to the top and really create something for yourself. I do also feel that you can't really know how much about yourself until you've lived somewhere else. So I do recommend, you know, that you should at least spend some time in another city to see what is happening in other places. Now for me, to kinda come back to the answer, it was later in life when I really started to venture out. I think I was in my 20s by the time I got to New York. But, you know, I started visiting all these other cities that had major graffiti art scenes. And every time I would go, I was like, man, this is awesome. And then I would feel sad to come back to Houston, 'cause I'm trying to explain to my friends this experience that I had, and they're just looking at me like, oh, that sounds cool. And so what I learned was anytime I would go somewhere and have this experience, I took it as my personal responsibility to bring that content to Houston and figure out how can I make that happen or plant those seeds here so that this can develop, and then the locals can then experience something like that here. So as an example, like the whole mural festival, that really spawned from, you know, various trips to different cities and experiencing different live painting events, and really just seeing what it could do. And I was like, you know, Houston needs that. So instead of sitting back and complaining about what Houston doesn't have, you have to ask yourself, "What doesn't Houston have for me?" And whatever that answer is, that's your task now. That's your job, to make that happen so that it's there for you. And then as you do that, you're giving that to the rest of the community. So the answer is learn as much as you can from those cities and bring that back to Houston and make that happen here.

Ashley:

Definitely. I'm gonna have to agree. So I think one of the things that like, I mean, it took, I spent 27 years of my life trying to get outta Texas, only to come back five years later. And in that time that I went to and lived in Baltimore, a lot of what GONZO has said, you know, was really important for me to learn who I was without my parents, who I was, you know, in a city where I was no longer in the majority and I was a minority. To learn about, you know, what was important to me. And so my thesis was about the cultural complexity of Latinidad, because that was something that I was trying to figure out as my own identity as a third-generation Mexican American, you know, and what that meant to be from a family that has dealt with culture

erasure. And so, you know, living in Baltimore, I learned a lot. The city also has a very different pulse, like I said, than Houston. When I left Baltimore, I realized that I knew more about Baltimore city's history than I did my own history. And so that has been kind of important for me to really think about as I've taken on the role as a curator at DiverseWorks, is really learning Houston's history and trying to figure out what are those threads, how am I connected to it, and how I can think about the things that I was thinking in Baltimore and experienced in Baltimore and bring it, you know, here and have those conversations.

Reyes:

Yeah, I will say that, like, so when I lived in Austin, I think kind of, there was pros and cons to having, like, in regards to, like, so many different writing scenes. So I remember, like, I did my MFA at Texas State University, but I lived in Austin. But that writing scene, quote unquote, was dominated by, like, University of Texas writers. And so it was, like, a really interesting, like, well wait, why aren't we talking to each other? But I think they're kind of like, that was the con of it, was like, "Oh, you're not in this program? "I don't wanna talk to you, man." And you kinda get, like, those silos of, like, of arts. And so like, Houston does kind of, like, have some silos in regards to it. But I mean, like, for me, they're more permeable, in my experience, in Houston, of like, I've spoken to so many visual artists and I've written about visual artists and their work, and I think there was certainly, yeah, there's certainly more permeability. And I guess talking to you two, I guess, Ashley, can you talk a bit about, like, again, like, that multidisciplinary or, like, how kind of the way Houston manifests that, than let's say like, somewhere else that you've experienced.

Ashley:

Yeah, I mean, I think what GONZO said earlier when he was talking about what makes Houston unique is the fact that, like, how artists are really interested in helping each other and collaborating with one another on their work. And like even, so like, yesterday, DiverseWorks wants two projects. And, like, both of those projects were full of collaborations, and some that we didn't even know about until the art was, you know, like, finally being uploaded. And so, you talked about how the scenes here are siloed but they're also permeable, and it's because I think that everybody really wants to connect with each other. And, you know, in some cities, and I don't think that this is necessarily the way that I would describe Baltimore, but in some cities where there's not a lotta large institutions or there's a lotta funding, there does tend to be less collaboration because it's kind of looking out for yourself and making sure that you're supporting, you know, like you're able to get stuff before you're spreading out and helping others. Like I said, not in saying that that's reflective of Baltimore, but that's something that does happen when there's a scarcity or there's that fear that, well, that person's getting

funding and I'm not. And so some of those silos stay siloed. But I think here in Houston, I don't think that that has really been the case that I've noticed in the last two years. I think everybody's willing to help or they congratulate each other and, like, support as best as they can.

Reyes:

GONZO, yeah, do you have a response for that, or add on, or?

GONZO:

I mean, I concur with what Ashley was saying. You know, I'm always surprised, pleasantly surprised, when I see artists working together, and when I see these things, like you were saying. Sometimes you don't even realize that, you know, these people are working together. But like, again going back to the support, you know, different disciplines coming together, you know, when Aerosol Warfare Gallery was open full-time, you know, we opened our doors to writers in the schools. And they also working with Meta-Four, which is a poetry slam group. And they would come to the gallery and they would, you know, use the space as a practice, and also, you know, kinda give performances. And, you know, for me, anytime you can get two different disciplines that cross paths, I mean, what came outta that and those activities was life-changing for a lot of people that experienced that. And that happens all the time. There's always people that come together, even two different artists, different styles, and they work on a piece. And in the end, you know, I think the people that live here really benefit from the end result.

Ashley:

Mm-hmm.

Reyes:

Yeah, and I know I said silos, but I mean, you know, it's not inherently bad to kinda, again, allow each practice to kinda grow on its own merit. Like again, like, I've never worked with, like, sculpture and using metals. So, you know, what can I really contribute, you know, to that conversation in regards to someone who's like, "I'm sculpting something out of steel," and I'm like, "Oh, well I'm working with metaphors." And they're gonna be like, "What?" And it's, I think, you know, there is merit to, again, having each art have its own, like, conversation and have its own scene. But it's also like, yeah, touching upon, like, how those things can work together. I suppose my next question then goes into like, what is, I guess, like an infrastructure, you know, that you would like to see in Houston, or maybe that already exists in Houston you kinda want to see bolstered. So for example, me, yeah, like, I'm a huge fan of zines in Houston, and that's just, like, there's Zine Fest Houston and then there's also the little publishers of zines that are happening. And I really love that. And that's just something I want to, like, grow, and I want to help and contribute to. And so, yeah, what do you think about that,

Ashley?

Ashley:

I think one of the things that I really hope happens, and maybe I haven't quite figured out how this would happen, but Houston is starting to get designated arts and culture scenes. And in Baltimore we had three arts and culture scenes that were designated by the Maryland State Council. And in those arts and culture scenes, there was actually tax cuts for artists. So artists living and working within those culture scenes were able to produce and present work, and they wouldn't have to, they had special tax cuts, they had artists housing that was in there. And so it was really building up the art and culture scene to really support and produce and present artwork of all different kinds. And so that's something that I have always admired about Baltimore and the art scenes that they have, or the communities that they have there, and would love to see happen here, or that I can understand how those artists tax cuts and artists housing would really make a big difference here in Houston.

GONZO:

I a thousand percent believe in that as well. I sit on different boards and am in different conversations, and one of the top things that bubble up is artists are looking for affordable studio space, warehouse space, and living space. And if they can combine all of those, even better. But I see a huge lack in affordable, and I'll say that again, affordable spaces for artists. 'Cause a lotta times people will build something and they say they're affordable, but then when you look at the pricing, they're like, I don't know any artists that can afford that. So, you know, truly affordable spaces. Because I think once you give the artists the opportunity to be able to incubate, you'd be surprised. You know, economics follows art. You know, you establish the space, you establish the artists, you get them going. It's almost like the art scene is the canary in a cage of the economy. When the artist is doing great, the economy, it follows suit because everything's going well. So I think the more you can foster the art scene as a whole, it really just pays back economically for the entire city.

Ashley:

Mm-hmm, definitely.

Yeah. I guess kinda revisiting something we talked about earlier in terms of, you know, we've talked about crafts and, like, different practices. I guess in regards to, like, diversity in terms of like demographics, right, and kinda the size, just the sheer size of this city. I know I lived in Austin in Central Texas, or at least rather the places in Central Texas that I lived in. 'Cause I mean, it's different, one thing to stay, like, San Antonio versus, let's say, in Austin. And kind of like, there in Austin I felt like my art wasn't

really well supported. Just because, again, like, the Latino, Latina, Latinx scene, it's not as, I would say, robust, in my experience, or supported, just because of the way that city is developing. I suppose, is there something you would like to say about that Ashley, right, in regards to, like, your experiences in organizing, practicing here in Houston, and its kinda diversity in demographics, as opposed to other places you've been?

Ashley:

Lemme think about that. GONZO, do you have...?

GONZO:

So, yeah, so for us here, again, I think, thankfully, as far as, like, in the street art community, 'cause I mean, that's where I focus in, that in itself is diverse. We have people from all different ethnicities that are participating. You know, there's female artists. And then also, again, rolling into the mural festival, our whole goal is to be able to showcase as many different artists from as many different places, specifically because we feel that Houston can compete and the artists that live here can compete on a international level. The world just doesn't know it yet. And so we try to use this event to really amplify those artists and really showcase the, I mean the whole point is to showcase the diversity. So for us, you know, we find it easy to work with people from all different parts of the world and social economic backgrounds. For us, it's more about your skill level. Or not, I'm sorry, it's about your style and then what you're producing art-wise. We don't look at anything else, like, as, like, you have to check these boxes. You know, a lotta times, you know, people have amazing art, and they're all from different places across the planet. And, you know, it's just a win-win.

Reyes:

Yeah, I will say that, like, to some degrees, yeah. In Houston, you have to try to not be diverse. You know? Like, it's kind of, and I will say that I have seen kind of, like, lineups, and like, I will say in the literary scene, like, where it's not diverse. And it's kind of like, well, how, how did you do that? You have to try to do that to not be diverse. But yeah, Ashley, if you wanna add anything, or?

Ashley:

Yeah, I mean, you know, thinking about what GONZO said in terms of, I was on this panel the other day and they talked about radical diversity. And radical diversity in terms of a German context and how they're using it as, like, having a presentation of different resources and skills, and kinda spreading that out. And we talked a lot about radical equity and radical representation. I think, you know, when I moved back to Houston coming from Baltimore, I was in a very interesting, like, mindset. And I think Houston's art scene was also very interesting as well, where it did feel like there was a lack of representation of artists of color that I was coming into,

especially on the kinda, like, more contemporary side, in the art side of the world that I work on. And I think over the last two years, that has rapidly changed. I think that there's more younger artists and artists of color that are making themselves known, that are putting on different projects here in the city. And it's changed the conversation a lot. And so I think that kinda reminded me of that radical representation and radical equity. And I think right now it'll be interesting to see how things shift with COVID, because I think the Houston art scene has taken a huge hit. And I think that there are several kind of, like, the Houston Accountability Task Force that's popped up that is really trying to hold the city accountable. So it'll be interesting to see how diversity, equity, and representation really changes in the city.

Reyes:

Yeah, and on that note, you know, on that same thing of, like, diversity and, you know, the way Houston is built in that. And I wanna say maybe talk a little bit about, like, how literally Houston is built, right. In regards to how it's organized, whether it be wards, right. Historically there's, you know, First Ward, Third Ward. And I think in my experience in living in, let's say in, like, a smaller town and living in another, like, big city, I think it was always astounding to me just kind of how, again, and I said this before, just how vast the city is and how unknowable it can be, and kind of like how you can end up in one part, like, again, like you can be like in East End in one minute and then quite literally in five to 10 minutes you can be in the Heights, which is an entirely different kind of, like, feel and mood. I guess, GONZO, if you wanna talk about kind of, again, like, your experiences with that, right. Whether it'd be organizing or, like, the way that feeds your art, right. Just kind of how big the city is and how it's built.

GONZO:

Yeah so, you know, if people are listening to this and they're not from Houston, Houston didn't grow up, it grew out. And so, you know, when you have more smaller cities, as far as square footage, you know, like in the east coast everyone went up, and so you have this really high density. Whereas Houston, we had so much space like, ah, we'll just build, you know, next door, and just keep doing that. And so we went from the inner loop, to the beltway to, you know, Highway 6 to, you know. And so-

Ashley:

Yeah.

GONZO:

When I was first doing my graffiti writing, you know, based on the east side of downtown, I didn't even really hear about any other graffiti writer because Houston's so big. And we were all in different parts of the city and we were all doing our own thing, not knowing

that we all existed. And at one point we finally crossed paths, and we all crossed paths, like, in downtown, 'cause that was kinda the central spot. And so, you know, this is all before the internet, we found that we started to organize ourselves as graffiti writers, and we would do this thing called the Writer's Bench. And what that was was once a month, if you're a graffiti writer, and it just kinda went out word of mouth, that once a month on, you know, the last Friday of the month, just show up at downtown. You know, we have Party on the Plaza, just show up there. And, you know, sometimes it'd be a hundred people there, sometimes there'd be three people there. But we would try our best to get the word out and organize ourselves. Now moving forward, again, Houston's such a wide area that before technology, you know, if you wanted to get the word out, you really had to put your work in to make sure you hit all the different parts of the city to either drop your flyers off, to invite people to come out to events. And I think now with social media, obviously things have changed where you can still broadcast your organization, you know, to the masses. But I think Houston is still, I still see people kinda tend to stay in their little area. I know people that, you know, that are from the Heights that like to be in the Heights, which is cool. I see people that are in the East End that like to just be in the East End. So there is that comfort zone of doing your thing in your neighborhood and your part of town. But I think when you have a really cool event that really draws everyone in, I really like to see that co-mingling of different neighborhoods coming together. And then that's where you start meeting people and then that's when your relationships start. So I think bringing people together is really healthy.

Reyes:

Yeah, Ashley, kind of, I guess, in your experience, right, kind of in living in different places, organizing in different places. Yeah, the way that you experience how Houston is built and whether, you know, it's easy to work with, whether it's more difficult. I don't know. Like, what do you think?

Ashley:

So my perspective, the city is a very, it's very quite different. Because, like, I grew up outside of the city. So I was born in Baytown and then my parents moved to Dayton. And so I've always experienced the city as being someone who drives from the outskirts in. And it's funny that you talk about the highways because, like, they're building 99. So Houston is eventually going to have its third loop and we're just gonna look like a massive target. And so like, I have been watching that kinda develop and watching my parents', like, rural area change. And I think there's a lotta possibility. And so one of the things that we've been talking about at DiverseWorks is even though it's great to have a centralized art scene, like really understanding, like, how other art scenes are experiencing or creating work outside of the loop. And so we've been doing this program called Project Freeway that we have been working with artists in their communities

and trying to learn that way. And one of our artists is actually gonna be talking about highways coming up, and kinda looking at the highways as a place, because I mean, it takes me from, I'm on the Southeast side of town or the East side of town. So it takes me an hour to get from my house to Alief. And so, like, sometimes, like, I don't wanna sit in traffic. Sometimes I just wanna, like, stay here. It's always an adventure to get downtown. But I do think that, like, space is really interesting because of the way that it is being built, instead of being up and it being built out. And Houston's rapidly changing. When I left five years ago, things were completely different than they are today. I'm sure, you know, things are gonna be, I mean, things have already changed since March. I haven't been down there and I went down there the other day, and I was like, "Holy shit." Like all these things have been built, neighborhoods look completely different. And so I think that that is something that, you know, when you're thinking about organizing, it does make it a little difficult because everybody's history is kind of built on top of each other's history or it's been a erased because, like, another neighborhood has been built on top of it. It makes it hard to connect when you think about there's, like, we have public transportation but it's not the best public transportation. So thinking about artists that don't have access to be in the center city as much. I dunno, it just makes it really hard sometimes to think about, like, who your audience is when you're organizing, or how to bring them together, too.

Reyes:

Yeah, absolutely. I will say that again, just 'cause Austin's, like, my main point of reference in regards to, like, how Texas cities are built and, like, really what they look like for me, I will say that one thing that I I guess appreciated was, like, when there's a concentration of something, like, you have kind of like a choice that I guess it's easier to make. 'Cause Ashley, you mentioned, like, yeah, like I, for example, live near Hobby Airport. And it's like, oh, there's a art show, really cool, that's, let's say, yeah, downtown. And it's like, do I really want to drive for, like, potentially 30, 45 minutes to make it to an opening, find parking, and all that stuff. Whereas like in Austin, like, you know, you could go to a bar for a music show, and like, you're like, "Oh, I don't really to like the music here, "let's go next door." And you get a totally different like, scene, right. It's kind of like that walkability, the navigability of, like, one space to another. And I guess I dunno if y'all had kind of like a comment on that. 'Cause I guess in my experience, yeah, like in Houston it's like once you pick something and you don't like it, then you better have, like, a really good backup plan. As opposed to, like, say in Austin, it's like, "Oh, I don't like this place, "let's just walk two blocks down." Ashley.

Ashley:

Yeah, I think one of the things though, when I first moved back, I was staying at my parents'. And so it was like when I knew I had to be

downtown, it had to be a whole day of things, because, like, I didn't wanna have to drive all the way back just to drive, you know, two hours later to another art show. So I spent a lotta time in my car and just kinda, like, hopping around different events or, you know, trying different things. But I mean, and when I lived in Baltimore, I mean, and that's one of the things that I love. I had access to public transportation. I had access, you know, to walk everywhere that I could. I could hop in a Uber or a Lyft and it would take me like five minutes, 10 minutes to get, you know, to the farthest part of the city, depending. And so like here in Houston, like, there is that geographic distance that you have to factor in to an event. I mean, I think in my position I have to be committed to go. 'Cause I mean, it's definitely for work too, but like, you know, it's harder to bounce around depending on what happens. But I think when there's a lotta stuff happening in one night, it makes it easier.

GONZO:

Yeah, that's one thing I really am looking forward to as more developments happen, and Houston's starting to grow up now, is hopefully more foot traffic. Because I do agree that one of the things Houston is lacking is that, you know, the cool strips of everything. You know, back in the days, that little strip in Midtown where you have, you know, the record store next to the Continental Club, you know, next to a little restaurant. Like that's a cool little spot and it's like a block. You know, and then you go a little further down then you have, like, the MATCH. But you're right in saying that, you know, there aren't many places where you can go into a spot and then there's an entire row of nightlife where you can kind of come in and out. You know, we have 19th Street in the Heights, but 19th Street in the Heights is kind of its own thing. But I think Houston can benefit from having more areas like that.

Reyes:

Yeah.

Ashley:

Yeah, definitely.

Reyes:

And yeah, I mean, there's obviously, like, pros and cons to then how those things are instituted and how they come about. But yeah, I think that was kinda one thing that I noticed in living in a different city. I guess my next question is, going back to the original question, you know, should I or shouldn't I move to another city for its art scene. And GONZO, you talked about how like, yeah, like why would I go to New York when I can become one of a million people. Or I've heard the same thing about, like, the music scene, right. Like, okay, I can either stay in Houston and, you know, take advantage of what's here or build up what's here, versus moving to Nashville, becoming like another, you know, just another, like, person with a guitar. And so my question

then is like, yeah, why are you still here? Why are you still practicing your craft in Houston? What's kind of, like, made you stick around?

GONZO:

So for me, again, early on I saw what Houston was lacking in my eyes to make this a city where I wanted to live. And that was more visible art around the city. Back in the days, there really weren't that many murals as you drove around. And so I made it a mission early on to stay here and just keep adding to the visual landscape of the city, because I wanted Houston to have a visual presence on the street. So as you drove from A to B, 'cause you're always in your car, I like the idea of dropping these art interventions, you know, at different intersections. And also for me, I just felt like, at the time, it was bigger than me. It was more about what can I do to help usher in and really solidify this graffiti street art movement so that it could become something here. I was working towards this goal because it didn't exist. I was working towards this idea to being, you know, sustainable as a graffiti and street artist. And so, because it wasn't available, I wanted to make sure that I stayed here long enough to carve that out. And thankfully now we have a sustainable scene. I now know more artists that are graffiti and street artists that live off their work. Back in the days, everyone had, you know, a second job or a third job and then doing art when they could. But thankfully the scene here is supportive enough, as far as for mural artists and, you know, street artists, that people are getting gigs and the city has really embraced this culture. And so now what was feared and unknown is now, you know, in demand, and it's being embraced, and there's a lotta people that are benefiting from that. So now that we're at this point, I do feel that I now can kind of, you know, I don't need to push that ball as much because it has its own momentum. And so now I can focus on my art and taking what I'm doing to other cities. And that's kinda what I've been working on and implanting my stuff and my art, you know in other countries and other cities. So that's the direction I'm going in. But as far as moving, you know, it'd be great to have a six month residency somewhere else or, you know, whatnot. So I keep my options open. But no matter where I go on this planet, Houston's always my home.

Reyes:

Yeah, Ashley, and I kind of, like, wanna add kind of a bit of a caveat to your kind of, like, same question, but yeah, like having, you know, grew up in different parts of Houston, like whether it's a Baytown, then having worked in Huntsville, and then moved to Baltimore and then returned back, I suppose my question is for you, like, yeah, one, like, what made you, I guess, want to kinda venture out of Houston, but then also what pulled you back, and why are you still, you know, practicing here.

Ashley:

Yeah, I mean, like I said earlier, like, I'd been trying to get outta Texas most of my life . I just didn't feel like I fit in here in the city. I mean, growing up in a small town was really tough. And so that's part of, I think, why I wanted to get out. I didn't have the best few years when I lived in Dayton. And so, you know, Huntsville, you know, I found my family, my, you know, friends that I am still really close to today. And when I went to Baltimore, I was trying to decide between Baltimore and California and UC Irvine. And UC Irvine was an hour and a half outside of the city of LA. And so when I had gone and visited, I didn't really feel like I was in the middle of an art scene or a space. And I felt like because I was in Huntsville for undergrad, that's what I really needed for my experience to grow. And I went to Baltimore and did a site visit at MICA. And the whole time I was there, I stayed with a student that it was in my program. They brought me to a lecture. They had an artist that was onsite. I went to three different art events. And so I was like, "Okay, this is where I need to be "to really kind of learn and grow." And so that's why I ended up choosing Baltimore. And you know, now that I'm back I've been asking myself for the last two years, like, why is it important that I'm here. You know, I know that I came back for a reason. You know, I'm thankful that I got the job at DiverseWorks and I'm really excited that I have an opportunity to curate there and grow, but I still am very much early in my career. So I'm still trying to figure out, like, where my voice and my practice can really help artists in the city and, like, how I can bring things together and affect change. You know, I toggle between living outside of the city and driving in and then staying in the city sometimes. So like, trying to find a balance between that as well. But lately I've been thinking about, like, what it would mean to actually do something art-related out here in the rural area of Dayton, which doesn't really have an art scene but is rapidly changing and I think could benefit from one. Yeah.

GONZO:

I'll jump in once again and just say, you know, if you are an artist, a creative person, and you really feel the need that you have to get out of Houston, I'm not saying that you should just, you know, just stick it out forever. You know, you should go and explore. You should go out and see what the world has to offer. Because sometimes, you know, you don't know until you go and experience these other things. You know, you might not even realize what it is that you need here to make yourself successful. So, you know, maybe there's a hybrid solution where you're, you know, maybe take a month off and go somewhere and hang out and really embed yourself into a local scene. Or make the rounds. You know, if you have the availability to couch surf and just, you know, check out what New York has to see. You know, just check out all these different cities. But I think you'll be surprised that the more you go out and you see and experience other cities, when you come back to Houston, I think you'll have fresh eyes of how you can cultivate that here and work that to your advantage in the longterm.

Ashley:

Definitely, definitely. Also my parents always told me, "Go wherever the money takes you." And so it was just funny that the money brought me back to Houston.

Reyes:

Yeah, yeah. And I will say that definitely, like, in my experiences, like I have friends who moved to, like, different cities and they live and thrive elsewhere. And I think in that, that's how I stay attuned to what other people are doing in different cities. Like I have a friend who lives in California, and I check in with them every once a while to see what's happening in that scene, in that literary scene. And see how they're dealing with, like, different issues or different, you know, literary traditions. And I think that's also important as well. And again, like thank you both for your expertise and your experience and sharing them. And I think you're both incredibly valuable members of the Houston community, which is why we curated it to be this way. But again, thank you. If you don't mind, I would like to ask just some kinda random questions that, you know, they're not really as deep, hopefully. So first question, Ashley, favorite takeout in Houston.

Ashley:

Ooo. Oh, that's hard, that's hard! I've been on a big Vietnamese kick, and I really miss Cali and going and getting a bahn mi or vermicelli bowls, and, like, sitting at the park there in Midtown Park. But that was my favorite thing to do when we were at the office.

Reyes:

GONZO?

GONZO:

You know, I love food. And especially now during the pandemic, like, it's hard to say one thing is particularly my favorite takeout, because Houston's culinary scene is so gangster. For me I'm gonna say that we just kinda spin the roulette wheel and we hit, yo, this is what we're ordering today. And it's always a great surprise. And so I'm gonna say anything that's on the app that's deliverable is great takeout.

Reyes:

Fair enough. Let's see, this is usually a difficult question to answer, which is why I kinda ask it, but favorite Houston artist working right now. Ashley.

Ashley:

No, GONZO, go for it.

GONZO:

Wow. You know, so here's the thing. Like, again, there's so many great people that are doing amazing work. To narrow it down to one person, man, that's really hard. But I'll tell you, so I have a couple guys that I really like what they're doing. And I'll say Robert Hodge. You know, he's a artist kinda based outta Third Ward. And I've known this guy for years. And I love the work that he's doing. You know, recently he's has a body of work where he takes a million album covers and, you know, X-ACTO's out images and make these beautiful collages out of album covers. And it's amazing work. So, I mean, he's one of my favorites, but there's like, I mean, I'm drawing a blank, but I got my man, man, I got too many. But lemme think about it.

Reyes:

That's a good one. That's a good one.

GONZO:

I'll give you some more.

Ashley:

Yeah, I mean I think the same as GONZO. Like, there's just so many amazing artists. And like right now I'm following a lotta different individuals for different reasons. You know, I'm really interested in Conversations with the Land. So I've had some really great conversations with Brian Pradas and also JD Pluecker, who did this project called Unsettlement where he's looking at his own family history from Houston in the last seven generations. You know, I come across a lotta artists that I'm really interested in and excited to work with. Right now I'm developing a project on the future looking through kinda like a clear perspective, clear speculative future. So really excited to look at Houston through that lens coming up in the spring.

Reyes:

All right, final question. Any upcoming projects or things you just wanna let people know about. GONZO.

GONZO:

So I guess there's something that's cooking in the laboratory. There's something cooking in the bat cave-

Reyes:

Nice.

GONZO:

That I can't really release the details as of yet, but it's still kind of getting cooked in the oven. And hopefully the next month or so, something's gonna bubble up. And then as soon as it's ready, definitely it's gonna be something pretty huge for me that we can share with the rest of the city.

Reyes:
Absolutely. Ashley?

Ashley:
I can't wait. So DiverseWorks actually just launched a couple of things this week. You can visit DiverseWorks.org. But we have a video performance piece by Yue Nakayama that's online, and then a performance series that's by Sara Dittrich, both online. And then we have upcoming an artist talk with Adriel Luis, who is the digital curator in emergent new media at the Asian Pacific American Museum and Smithsonian DC, who will be joining us for a diverse discourse lecture on October 7th. And then we also just announced the Idea Fund launch. And so the Idea Fund is, you know, has kicked off and applications are due in November. November 16th to be exact. So, yeah, there's a lot going on at DiverseWorks that I'm working on right now.

Reyes:
Absolutely. Well, again, thank you so much. Thank you both for talking about this really vast issue that you could really like, or question rather, that, you know, you can take so many different nuances with. But again, thank you so much and good luck with everything. Stay safe and stay well.

Ashley:
Yeah.

GONZO:
Awesome.

Ashley:
Thank you, it was a pleasure.

GONZO:
Thank you for inviting.

Reyes:
Of course.

Ashley:
Bye.

GONZO:
Bye bye.

Spokesperson:
This podcast is powered by Fresh Arts, a Houston-based nonprofit that helps advance the careers of local artists and creatives, the resource sharing, skill-building initiatives, and artist-centered community programs. Visit FreshArts.org for more information.

