

“Our Little Gallery” of Abstract Art in Houston, 1938

In May, 1938, Houston newspapers ran arts notes about the opening of a new gallery in town:

Small Gallery Is Established Here for Exhibit of Works by Local, Out-OF-Town Artists

Art Colony Greet Little Gallery

Abstract Works Put on Display¹

The opening of a gallery in any American city outside the major art centers on the coasts or in the industrial mid-west was a newsworthy event in those days. But the real excitement that surrounded the opening of Our Little Gallery (as it was called) might have been best caught by a title combining those in all three articles:

Small Gallery Is Established Here for Exhibit of **Abstract Works by Local Art Colony.**

Who would have thought that Houston, in 1938, had a local art colony making enough abstract work to fill a closet, let alone a gallery. That, for Houston, was news!

According the *Houston Press*, “the present gallery has been brought into being by McNeill Davidson and a group of her co-workers, Christine Garland, Robert Preusser, Frank Dolejska, Gene Charlton, Dean Lee, Carden Bailey, Harley Bruebaker [sic] and Forrest Bess.”²



Ola McNeill Davidson *Watching McNeill* c.1935, oil on canvas, 9x7 inches.
The young man watching Davidson paint is Robert Preusser.

All except Bess were students of Davidson. As a group, they were mostly young: Preusser and Dolejska were in their teens; Bailey, Brubaker and Bess in their 20's;

Charlton, at 30, and Garland, at 35, were the oldest of the group. Aside from Davidson, of course, who was a venerable 54³, but regardless of their ages, they were all devoted to that new thing for Houston: abstract art.



Dean Lee [Untitled abstract drawing] late 1930s, mixed media on paper, 5x3 ¾ inches. This is the only known work by Lee and was in the estate of Emma Richardson Cherry.

The Gallery was located in a two-story converted garage at 520 Branard Street in the Montrose neighborhood, the residence of Davidson's daughter and son-in-law, Barbara and Dr. Hugh Mangum. "Space in the lower gallery will be reserved exclusively for works of local painters. Collections invited from out-of-the-city artists will be shown in the upper galleries." The first out-of-towner exhibited in the upstairs gallery was New Orleans abstract artist [Will Henry Stevens](#). A collection of "post-war" (post-WW I, that is) German art followed the Stevens.



This is the garage behind 520 Branard as it looks today.

But the real excitement, from a local point of view, happened downstairs where “the work of a young group of artists following the newer trends” hung. There, “several watercolors are being exhibited by Gene Charlton. In addition there are new works by Robert Preusser, Christine Garland, Dean Lee and Ray Bowles.”⁴

The Gallery also served as a gathering place for the group:

Numerous volumes on current art and translations of European criticisms are available to all. And discussions stretch far into the night as a deeper understanding of art is approached.

Here a young group of abstract and non-objective painters who are attracting national attention by their work, gather daily for study.

Indeed some of them *were* gaining national attention. Alexander Hogue, writing in the Texas Centennial Special Number of *Art Digest* in 1936, had said:

The most progressive artists in Houston today, and the least appreciated, are two youngsters in their early twenties. Carden Bailey and Gene Charlton since they were small children have had the sympathetic and broad-minded guidance of McNeil Davidson, herself an artist.⁵



Gene Charlton [Titles Unknown], c.1937, watercolors, 14x20 inches

Bailey would later go on to a distinguished career as a designer for NBC in New York in the early days of television, and for Broadway, in addition to continuing his painting.⁶ Charlton established a dual career in Houston and New York and later Rome. In 1947 a critic for the *New York Times* found his work “striking and original” and his use of color “decidedly individual.”⁷



Gene Charlton [Cherries on Table], 1947, oil on canvas, 12 ½ x 15 ¾ inches (1);
Charlton *The Wind and the Trees*, 1951, oil on Masonite, 20x24 inches



Carden Bailey *Wood Tones*, early 1950s, oil on canvas

Already, a painting by Preusser (age 18) had been selected as one of twenty Texas works in the Third National Exhibition of American Art in New York City.⁸ In 1939 Davidson accompanied him to Chicago to study “modern” art with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy at the recently established [Chicago School of Design \(the New Bauhaus\)](#).⁹



Robert Preusser *Elsewhere* 1938 Oil on masonite 11x14 inches.

Back in Houston later on, he founded, along with Dolejska, Buck Schiwetz and others, the Contemporary Arts Association in 1947, forerunner of the present-day Contemporary Arts Museum. His national reputation grew through the 40s and early 50s, and in 1954 he moved to MIT where he spent the rest of his career teaching visual arts.

[Bess](#) became the most widely acclaimed Texas modernist until Rauschenberg.



Forrest Bess [*Mission Concepcion, San Antonio*], c.1935, oil on board, 12x9 inches (l);
Bess *Sign of Man*, 1950, oil on canvas, 5 ¾ x 5 ¾ inches (r)

Davidson hadn't originally intended to open a gallery. As early as the summer of 1937, she'd begun planning a "special show for artists of the newer trend" to consist of "abstractions and impressionistic paintings." At one point she and Charlotte Wilcox, her collaborator, intended to mount the show in October, 1937, in the gallery space Wilcox maintained in her Browse About Shop on Main Street. The date had to be pushed back, however, when Davidson left in August for a three-month visit to Europe. A main destination of her trip was the [Paris Exposition des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne](#).¹⁰

By late December Davidson was back in Houston, and planning for the abstract show resumed according to an article in the *Houston Press*:

A comparative exhibit of the work of contemporary painters both here and abroad, is being planned as one of the highlights of the 1938 art season.

The exhibit, which will be devoted entirely to the work of the moderns, is being arranged by McNeill Davidson and Charlotte Wilcox. It will be hung at the Browse About Shop.

The collection is being drawn from the works of a group of young painters throughout Houston and South Texas and will be supplemented with originals from such outstanding international artists as Benno, O'Keefe and Stevens.

The entire show is being planned to acquaint the public with the progress Houston painters are making in this new field of art which relies so much on design and color.

It will be the first exhibit of this kind to be shown in Houston under sponsorship of local artists.

'There are so many people who do not understand the work of the moderns and who do not know the progress they are making,' Mrs. Davidson said.

'This show will enable the public to judge for itself just how our Houston painters compare with those who have won a place in ranking art circles both here and in Europe.' ¹¹

For reasons unknown, the Browse About show did not take place. By May, 1938, Davidson and her brash band opened Our Little Gallery as a place of their own.

It's unclear how long the Gallery lasted. Probably not too long. A *Houston Press* article in October, 1938, mentioning new organizations in the city, says:

Foremost is Our Little Gallery under sponsorship of McNeill Davidson. Though not club-like in its organization [as the earlier Houston Artists Gallery had been], it is offering a thoroughly satisfactory medium for the exchange of ideas and work among painters.

Most of the members are drawn from the young moderns who fashion their technique after the patterns laid down by the abstractionists and non-objective artists.

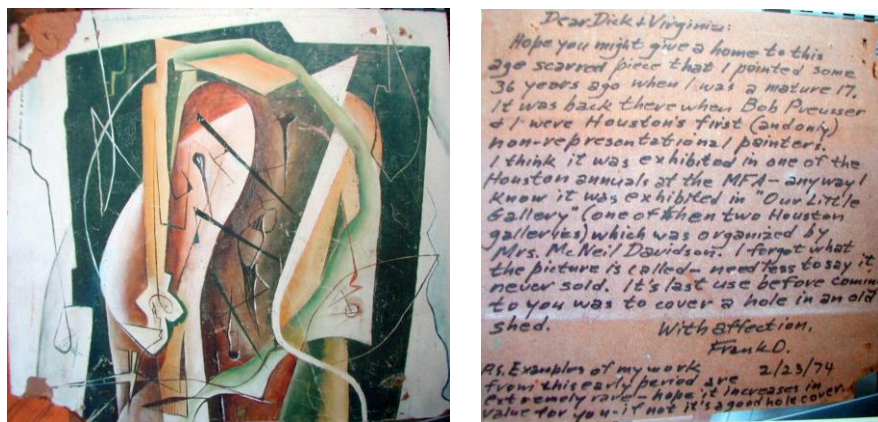
Frequent exhibits of the work of this group as well as out-of-town painters are shown at the Gallery...¹²

By March, 1939, according to the *Houston Chronicle*, Bess had "a co-operative art gallery in his studio in the 900 blocks [sic] of McGowen Avenue. Associated with him are the following Houston Artists: Carden Bailey, Gene Charlton, Russell Davis, Jan Olmstead."¹³ It is likely that Our Little Gallery had closed by then.

The City Directory for 1939 lists the rear building at 520 Branard as "vacant".

So far, no other mentions of Our Little Gallery have come to light, except for an inscription written by Frank Dolejska on the back of one of his paintings when he gave it to friends in 1974:

Hope you might give a home to this age scarred piece that I painted some 38 years ago when I was a mature 17. It was back there when Bob Preusser & I were Houston's first (and only) non-representational painters. I think it was exhibited in one of the Houston annuals at the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts] – anyway I know it was exhibited in "Our Little Gallery" (one of then two Houston galleries) which was organized by Mrs. McNeil Davidson. I forgot what the picture is called – needless to say it never sold. It's [sic] last use before coming to you was to cover a hole in an old shed. With affection, Frank D. 2/23/74



Frank Dolejska [Title Unknown] 1938 Oil on Masonite 15 x 16.

Our Little Gallery, short lived and perhaps not broadly appreciated, was a small step but a significant one along the path that took the Houston art world from Magnolia City to Space City. For at least a little while in 1938, Houston, far away from the major art centers of the US and Europe, had a gallery of its own devoted to showing art made by artists of its own inspired by the most avant-garde works of the day. That, for Houston was certainly news!



Maudee Carron *Magic Script #1* 1944 watercolor 8 ½ x 11 ¼ inches (l); Nione Carlson [Title Not Known] late 1930s oil on canvas on board 23 ½ x 29 inches (r)

1. Titles from newspaper clippings mounted on the same sheet and headed "Participation in 'Our Little Gallery' 1938", *Robert O. Preusser Papers, 1930-1990*, Archives of American Art, microfilm reel 1829. Much of the un-cited information quoted in the paragraphs below comes from these clippings.
2. Kirkham, Ione. "Small Gallery Is Established Here for Exhibit of Works by Local, Out-of-Town Artists," *Houston Press*, May 13, 1938.
3. Most biographical information is coming from: Powers, John and Deborah. *Texas Painters, Sculptors & Graphic Artists: A Biographical Dictionary of Artists in Texas Before 1942*. Austin, TX: Woodmont Books, 2000.
4. The Ray Bowles mentioned here was the 17 year old son of Ray Earl Bowles listed in Powers. He, Preusser and Dolejska all attended Reagan Senior High School. "Youth's Dream Comes True When His Charcoal Drawing is Named Winner," *Houston Press*, May 6, 1938.
5. Hogue, Alexandre. "Progressive Texas," *Art Digest*, vol. X, No. 17 (June, 1936). P.18. Texas Centennial Special Number.
6. Wilson, Earl. "Houstonian Contrives 'Merger' of NBC, CBS," *Houston Post*, Dec. 2, 1951.
7. Devree, Howard. "Artists One By One," *The New York Times*, Jan. 5, 1947.
8. Kirkham, Ione. "Houstonian's Paintings Selected For National Exhibit in New York," *Houston Press*, May 13, 1938.
9. Kirkham, Ione. "Bits of News From Here and There," *Houston Press*, Sept. 22, 1939.
10. Kirkham, Ione. "Modernist Show Will Be Delayed," *Houston Press*, Aug. 28, 1937.
11. Kirkham, Ione. "Contemporary Painters' Comparative Show Here Will Be 1938 Highlight[sic]," *Houston Press*, Dec. 24, 1937.
12. Kirkham, Ione. "Gallery's Fate Will Be Decided Soon," *Houston Press*, Oct. 28, 1938. The Gallery whose "fate" was to be decided was not Our Little Gallery, but Houston Artists Gallery, a cooperative venture founded in 1930 by Grace Spaulding John and a large group of other Houston artists. It operated sporadically through the 1930s, though with increasingly less vigor. Elizabeth Morris, the group's last president, indicated in Sept., 1939, that HAG would not be revived. "Houston Group No Longer Active," *Houston Press*, Sept. 1, 1939.
13. "Houston Artists Represented In Capital Exhibit," *Houston Chronicle*, Mar. 24,

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