

## Kenner's Rivertown Named Cultural District, Benefitting 1 Art Gallery For Now



By Adriane Quinlan, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune  
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Kenner's Rivertown is one of four new Louisiana Cultural Districts, a label that lets its artists and galleries sell work without charging tax. There is only one gallery in Rivertown, however, and as far as its owner knows, only one artist.

Abby Cantrell, 28, makes almost all the work sold at Peace of Art, including an eight-foot tall Marilyn Monroe portrait that she painted to look as defiant as Cantrell seems out in Rivertown, all on her lonesome. In this economically challenged stretch, once the downtown heart of growing Kenner, Cantrell is the only artsy type.

"Sometimes it's kind of like a ghost town," Cantrell said, looking out to Williams Boulevard on a recent evening when zero pedestrians were out walking zero dogs. In the vacant "shop" across the street, the mannequin of a barber gave an eternal haircut. Sometimes Cantrell thinks of just up and leaving.

But all that might change, thanks to the cultural district program. The fake barber could be replaced with a real one. "It would be nice," Cantrell said, "to have some company."

In the 67 districts designated since the program began in 2008 original works of art can be sold tax-free. As with motion picture tax credits, the program aims to bolster the economy by giving artists breaks, the result of a state-wide push to drill for Louisiana's culture alongside its oil.

The program would also give a tax credit to those who refurbish property within the cultural district. That's not a change for Rivertown, already named historic district.

The hope is that we can get an artist colony going on down there." -- Michael Ince, Kenner Planning Department

Being named a cultural district could help Rivertown market itself, and perhaps draw new galleries and new artists. As a cultural district, it will form a council of mostly local artists to oversee public art projects and displays. Already in the works: Covering electrical cabinets with art and bathing sidewalks with chalk art.

Gaye Hamilton, the state coordinator of the cultural district program, says the physical changes in a district play only a small role. "There's this intangible benefit in being recognized as an area that recognizes the culture, that has become as important a motivator as the tax exemptions." She cited the example of New York's SoHo. "And at some point, the artists get gentrified out."

"The hope is that we can get an artist colony going on down there," said Michael Ince of the Kenner Planning Department. He said Rivertown has great "bone structure," the small-town feel that's missing on Kenner's broader and more contemporary thoroughfares. "It's kind of weird and cliché to say, but Rivertown right now is its own open canvas."

If Rivertown now feels like an open canvas, it's because much of its past has been erased. These blocks housed Kenner's original downtown, these streets were a hive for shipping produce. It was home to what might have been the first heavy-weight prize fight, now memorialized in an oddly regal sculpture of bare-chested men in an all-out brawl.

Somewhere behind the vacant shopfronts and peeling paint hides that greasy charm. And Ince is trying to get it back. The historic district status is only one step.

A \$424,000 grant from the state Department of Transportation and Development replaced sidewalk concrete with brickwork and repainted lampposts, scooching Rivertown further back in time. Most recently, Rivertown opened a Department of Motor Vehicles express office in the hopes of drawing foot traffic, though the street entrance tells visitors to enter by the back door.

Kenner has a reason to expend so much energy on this stretch. It owns property here, formerly the sites of local museums developed in the 1980s by then-Mayor Aaron Broussard, who envisioned this narrow street as a local Smithsonian.

Since then, each of Broussard's four successors have tried, with mixed success, to wean Rivertown of public subsidies or reimagine it altogether. The museums proved too expensive to operate, and all were shut down with the exception of the Kenner Planetarium and the Rivertown Science Center -- not exactly the sorts of museums that artists are keen to frequent.

"I know I've been to Rivertown," said Barry Bischoff, a Metairie resident who as a hobby sells paintings, colorful scenes of downtown New Orleans haunts. "I went to the museum - I don't remember the terminology - where you look at stars on the roof? I didn't really see any art galleries."

Maybe that's why naming Rivertown a cultural district feels like a stretch. Although artists always seem drawn to a challenge. That's what Ince sees in Cantrell, his lone pioneer.

"She could have easily gone down to anywhere in New Orleans and probably be making a lot more money right now," he said. "And so we're lucky she's in Rivertown."

Artist and gallery owner Abby Cantrell stands in front of a portrait of Marilyn Monroe in her Rivertown gallery. Adriane Quinlan, NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune

One reason she's here is that family is nearby. Her father, Greg Cantrell, runs his landscape architecture firm from 421 Williams Blvd., just up the block. Greg Cantrell Inc. is a frequent recipient of City Hall contracts, including the design and construction of City Park.

Abby Cantrell is renting space in a state-owned building. She serves on the board of the Historic District Commission and is vice president of the Rivertown Merchants & Business Association, which she helped found. She is even developing the logo for Rivertown.

Her long-term goal is, she says, "to help people through art." She doesn't know how yet. So maybe this is how. But she has learned how to be an artist. Key rule: "You really create your own path. It's all on you."

Which is another way of saying that help from the state is fine, is good, is great, even. But artists see value in the value-less and the uphill climb, incentive or not. They are a tribe wary of the easy route.

"You know that quote she had on the Marilyn Monroe?" Ince asks. "I kind of think of it in the same way."

Around the portrait of Marilyn, Cantrell has painted, in Pepto-Bismol pink: "If you can't handle me at my worst, then you sure as hell don't deserve me at my best."