



The Provocateur

By Sue Mayfield Geiger

Jonatan Lopez is meandering around metal scraps and plastic torsos in his warehouse studio, not far from the Heights house he shares with his lobbyist boyfriend Randall Ellis, 40, and their two lab-mix dogs. “I make art about my personal life,” says Mexico-born Lopez, 31.

After four years in Houston, the soft-spoken metal sculptor has shown at city institutions such as Project Row Houses and—with a tubular tower last year that incorporated sketches by kids—Texas Children’s Hospital. Now, in a shift of artforms, he’s gearing up for his purportedly provocative “Latin Lover Conservation” performance piece at avant-garde forebear DiverseWorks (Sept. 17-18). It’s part of a group show featuring politically charged, multi-generational and, in some cases, half-clothed local artists, who will interact with the audience in risqué ways. A whisper? A kiss?

The hospital piece aside, Lopez’s work has typically begged for controversy; his recycled-metal sculptures are also often rooted in sexual mores, as in a female torso with a hole in its midsection. All of which is at odds with his early years in Monterrey, where he grew up the only child of devout Jehovah’s Witnesses. Struggling with their non-acceptance of his sexuality, he moved at age 16 to Austin, where he discovered his passion of “drawing with fire,” as he refers to welding.

“Art became a search for answers.” Lopez, whom a DiverseWorks insider calls “definitely an artist to watch,” is unabashed in defining his work: It’s about sex. “I had so many sexual taboos growing up,” he says. “Showing my art in new formats helps me to define myself, to set my own set of morals.”