

WIN  
IT!

10 PAGES OF PRIZES INSIDE!

# What's On

August 2005

THE SUMMER MAGAZINE

## Public vs. Private

Which Makes  
The Grade?


MIND BLOWING  
HOT GLASS WORKS

HOUSE OF STRAUS  
LOCAL ARTIST UNCOVERED

PRESORT  
STD  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
PERMIT #246  
LAS VEGAS NV







# The Best Kept Secret

## IN LAS VEGAS

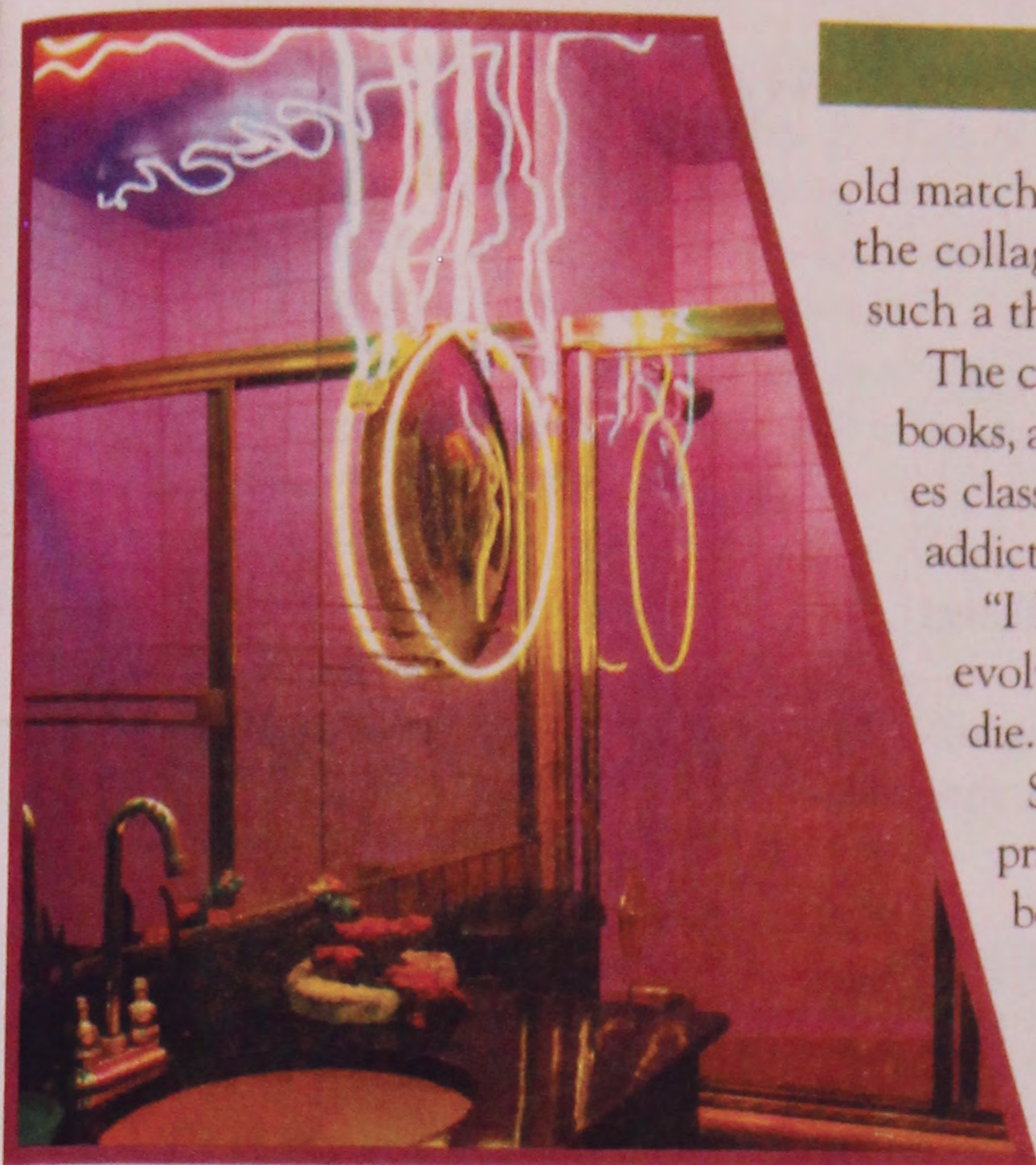
By Gigi Generaux  
Photos By Libby Hartman

Her art is a little Expressionist, a little Fauvist and a whole lot Pop, leaving the casual visitor to her gallery home to realize that Joyce Straus really is what she is often billed as: "The Best Kept Secret in Las Vegas." A resident of the city for more than 45 years, Straus is the consummate artist operating outside the academy. Blessed with not having to rely solely on art sales for survival, Straus has eluded the smug competitiveness of the art world with its suffocating quest for gallery status. Apart from various commissions and two small exhibits, her art has had a very limited public showing. She doesn't schlep to First Friday. She doesn't market. She has never been asked to exhibit at UNLV and jokes that's because she doesn't have a degree. But the fact that she possesses no formal art education has proven something of a blessing in disguise. Surrounded by her house's vermillion walls and collages that decorate them, Straus remarked, a little coyly, "No one told me what I couldn't, so I did everything."

This perspectival abandon, her near escape from the clutches of art history, left Straus with the freedom to work in any medium of her choice. She designs fabric on her computer, dyes silk in the batik method, fuses glass onto serving silverware (and just about everywhere else), welds metal sculptures into butterflies and constructs wooden wall hangings only to cover them in metallic car paint. Her most recent discovery—found objects—marks her move into a collage series she calls *Pollution Solution*.

Objects in Straus' collages take on a whole new meaning once removed from its original context. Rhinestone brooches become less stuffy,





old matchbooks more historically significant, a used tea bag, oddly whimsical. She makes the collages, she said, "because I'm fascinated with what people throw away; we live in such a throw away society."

The collages are microcosms, too, of her house in general, which is itself a *mélange* of rare books, art, collectibles and inspirational fervor. It is here that Straus exhibits her work, teaches classes in what she calls "Creative Thinking" and gives tours. Here, too, she feeds her addictions to both renovation and reading.

"I look at my house as my larger body, as Kahlil Gibran said. As I evolve, my house evolves. I will never be done until I'm done, and I will probably remodel until the day I die. I do not buy clothes. I buy books, tools and remodeling supplies," Straus said.

Straus' gusto for renovation has led her and husband, Neil, a retired M.D. in family practice, to occupy a house that is less living space and more art compound. When they bought the property in the '60s, it was 10,000 square feet and cost about \$40,000.

Now, after 40 years and \$250,000 in renovations, the house has been expanded to include a wood shop, a glass studio, a formal gallery with track lighting and a greenhouse. Construction continues on another 1,300-square-foot addition and a stainless steel/Lucite staircase meant to enlarge her

workshop and provide a computer design studio for her students. Circular windows and deco styling abound, from the kitchen to the bathrooms. In one bathroom, all the fixtures are black, dramatically lit up by a neon nebula of Straus' own design. In the sewing room, stamps, thread, fabric and old pattern books envelop all three canary yellow walls. In the vermillion living room, a custom-designed bookcase houses signed copies of works by John Erskine and Eugene O'Neill, a vintage Kodak Brownie Hawkeye camera, crystalline knickknacks and hundreds of other leatherbound books. Straus has been a rare book collector since the age of seven.

"I was a very early bloomer, but no one noticed," she joked. "How I got confident, I really don't know. I just always had a sense of self, and I was very, very lucky that my mother was a book lover."

"The House of Straus," as she is apt to call it, is so beautiful that her five children—Stephen, Susan, David, Danny and Karen—have unanimously decided never to sell the property but instead to use it as a museum and studio space when she no longer needs the space. It is true that the house has a wonderful energy, as if in every corner the artwork is breathing. Straus attributes that energy to the luck of having a very close family. Two of her grandchildren live in Las Vegas and have slept over at the house every weekend since the day they were born. Her eldest daughter has a master's degree in Hebrew education even through Straus herself is not religious. All her children were raised with Straus' simple belief: accept your children unconditionally, and have the courage to be who you are as a mother.

Asked if her children influence her art, Straus replied, "My children do not influence my art; they



There's so much to  
**look**  
 at, one wants to stand  
 there for hours,  
 picking out the  
 tiny  
 details.



influence every breath I take. And that's the truth. There's nothing more important to me in life than my children. They are truly my best friends. It's hard to even describe how close we all are, and how close they are with each other."

It would seem that Straus has the perfect family and the perfect life. But she is quick to caution people. Her life is by no means flawless.

"Life to me is just a grand adventure—which doesn't mean I'm happy 24 hours a day, because no one is," she said. "The key is to be at peace. I always say the happiest person you'll ever meet is the one you don't know intimately."

Straus stresses that she was not always an artist, only coming to the craft of visual expression after a mid-life crisis in her late thirties left her feeling that—despite several children and a good marriage—something was desperately missing from her life.

"It's not that I was any different before, it's just that I think I lived in a fantasy world," she said, "[as if I were] looking for a panacea. I think I was in a type of adolescence that I did not want to let go of."

"Children have  
no fear  
whereas adults



Straus went into six months of intensive therapy and came out of it an artist.

Her creative awakening came, she said, when she realized that airtight relationships were an unrealistic expectation and that true happiness could be achieved only through the governance of one's own choices.

"My grandchildren tease me, they say I love the word 'choice' because it rhymes with 'Joyce,'" she said. "I think we're just the sum total of all the choices we make in life. One of the reasons that we're such an irresponsible culture is that people don't want to deal with the consequences of their actions."

Straus used that life philosophy to start the School for Creative Thinking in 1973, an academy of private art and life-lesson classes that she runs from her house. "I teach children that there are so many choices [in life] and they should take their time making them. Right now, kids graduate high school. Their parents throw them into law school, medical school. If you can afford to, take the time off, see the world. When I was married young, I didn't even know who I was."

Straus began her school after a neighbor and admirer of her work, Mary Dombrowski, saw the artist's drawings at the (now defunct) Green Apple Gallery on Maryland Parkway, and asked Straus to teach her three daughters, Missy, Wendy and Lisa. The school's beginnings were humble.

"Mary lived down the street, came to my door, and just asked," Straus said. In just two years, however, word of mouth spread rapidly and the artist went from teaching

are intimidated by  
their own creativity.  
My role is to help  
them free themselves  
from that fear."



six children a week to 200. Roughly 10 years later, Straus started workshops for adults. Now, her congregation of students range in age from 5 to 84.

"Children have no fear whereas adults are intimidated by their own creativity," Straus said. "My role is to help them free themselves from that fear. If you go into a kindergarten classroom and ask 'who are all the artists?' everyone will raise their hand. As soon as the fifth grade, only a fraction of the class will raise their hand when asked the same question."

Straus stresses that her school is similarly a reaction against disposable American culture, the information age that trickles down even to the youngest in society.

"With all this information, we need one line messages that children can easily absorb," she said, "such as, 'Perfectionism is slow death.'"

Hannah Novick, a 7-year-old who attends The Meadows School, has benefited from such a message. Novick has been a student of Joyce's for three years and agrees that her projects are different from what she usually studies in school. "Joyce's projects are more artistic and more real," she says. "Normally, my teacher would just give us a piece of paper and she would paint a picture and make us copy it. But Joyce, she will make this whole art piece out of wood and plastic and stuff, and we get to make the same thing that she does. And it takes weeks and weeks to finish because you have to get so much into it that it looks so real."

**At the end of each class there is a discussion time "about life," as Straus puts it. This creative provocation is, she says, necessary at any age.**

"I am convinced after teaching for 35 years that the theory of levels of understanding [by age group] in children is not necessarily correct," she said. "I start my five year olds with the same elevation of philosophical thought as I do with the adults that I teach. I may present it a little differently, but it's still there."

Hannah concurs, saying that Straus' classes are more interactive and confidence-building than art instruction she has typically been exposed to. "She's inspired me so much to like art more than I did a couple years ago. I always used to think that my art projects weren't as good as they turned out. But Joyce inspired me to think of all of your work as, you know, not better than anyone else's, but really, really good like theirs. She teaches more than just art. She teaches people how to treat other people and to be nice and kind. Like if people make fun of you, don't run to a teacher and be sad, just walk away from them."

"She makes you feel so good about yourself," said Sue Becker, a student of Straus' for 10 years. "I always liked art but I never knew that I could do that much. You begin to look at things differently, look at colors differently. She's just an amazing and energetic lady, one of my favorite people."

Straus' life philosophy isn't something she just made up. She is board certified in Reality Therapy, a psychotherapeutic approach developed by UCLA-trained psychiatrist Dr. William Glasser in the '60s. Founded on the belief that current relationship problems are the source of all mental anguish, Glasser's method promotes "total behavior"—what one can immediately do and say—to exert change in one's life. His approach is kind of like cognitive behavioral therapy, only with a little more emphasis on choice thrown into the mix.

While Strauss stresses that she came to Reality Therapy fifteen years *after* her rebirth into Creative Thinking, it is clear that both the psychotherapeutic method and her own personal philosophy meld to influence her work. Straus' second ongoing series, entitled *The Temptation of Temptation* or *Eve Was Framed* is all about what she calls "the gift of choice." One piece in the series, simply entitled "The Gift" shows a serpent decorated with checkerboard skin—representative of the game of life—injecting choice into the convolutions of the brain. The image, a mauve and purple batik dye on white cotton, is startlingly frank.

"When I went through my phase of creativity, I can honestly tell you that a lot of my friends thought I was nuts," she said. "I didn't fit into the pattern of the typical doctor's wife."

Considering that van Gogh, Vermeer and Modigliani each died penniless, it's possible that Straus' success, given so little personal marketing, is truly a matter of luck and personal philosophy.

"This is important for me to tell you," she said. "I don't consider myself a *fine* artist. I consider myself a woman who loves what she does. I'm lucky [when] I sell and I'm not in competition with anyone except myself."

A public exhibition of Straus' Pollution Solution series is slated for display in Paul Kellogg's new gallery, not yet named, which will open in November at Charleston Boulevard near Main Street in the Arts District. **WO**

