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Miguel Nelson and Sherry Walsh

It all started as an experiment back in 2006. Miguel Nelson and his wife, Sherry Walsh, began renting out their home, called Marvimon, a swanky, converted old car showroom at the edge of Chinatown, for photo, television and film shoots, and private events. They also began holding a monthly clandestine culinary event called "secret restaurant." With these invitation-only bashes, Nelson was playing with the idea of public and private space. But he eventually got bored with the staid nature of these gatherings, put on his lab coat, fired up the beakers, and began to tinker with the formula. The events began to change shape.

"At one point we pissed a lot of people off," Nelson says. "They had this impression that they were going to have this amazing fine-dining experience."

Instead, what secret restaurant guests found that first night of the metamorphosis was pianist Andrew Shapiro seated in the center of the room at a Steinway grand piano surrounded by tightly packed cocktail tables. No chairs. Confounding the guests further, Nelson played maestro throughout the multi-course meal, instructing guests when to eat bites of their food and takes sips of their paired wines on cue with the music.

"It was supposed to be this cenesthesia experience that happened between the ears and the mouth, and even the eyes," says Nelson. "At the end of the day it turned into this cacophonous mess. Some people were shushing other people who were talking. The people who were talking were angry that they couldn't talk during the dinner. A fight broke out afterward. I felt like Robert De Niro at the end of *Raging Bull* standing up there, holding the microphone. I just wanted to have a fun, alternative type of dinner party. It wasn't for profit. It wasn't a business model. Even though people paid like \$65 each that night, the evening actually cost me \$5,000. Really, it was a social experiment."

The couple was undaunted but decided on some further changes. "We don't want money involved anymore," says Walsh. "So now we just pay for it ourselves. There are too many expectations when people pay." The parties became a little smaller and less about food. Nelson also began filming these events with HD cameras and posting clips on his eponymous Web site; they essentially became an extension of his video art. "Secret Restaurants" became "Secret Experiences" and scoring an invite to one now is like finding the Golden Ticket.

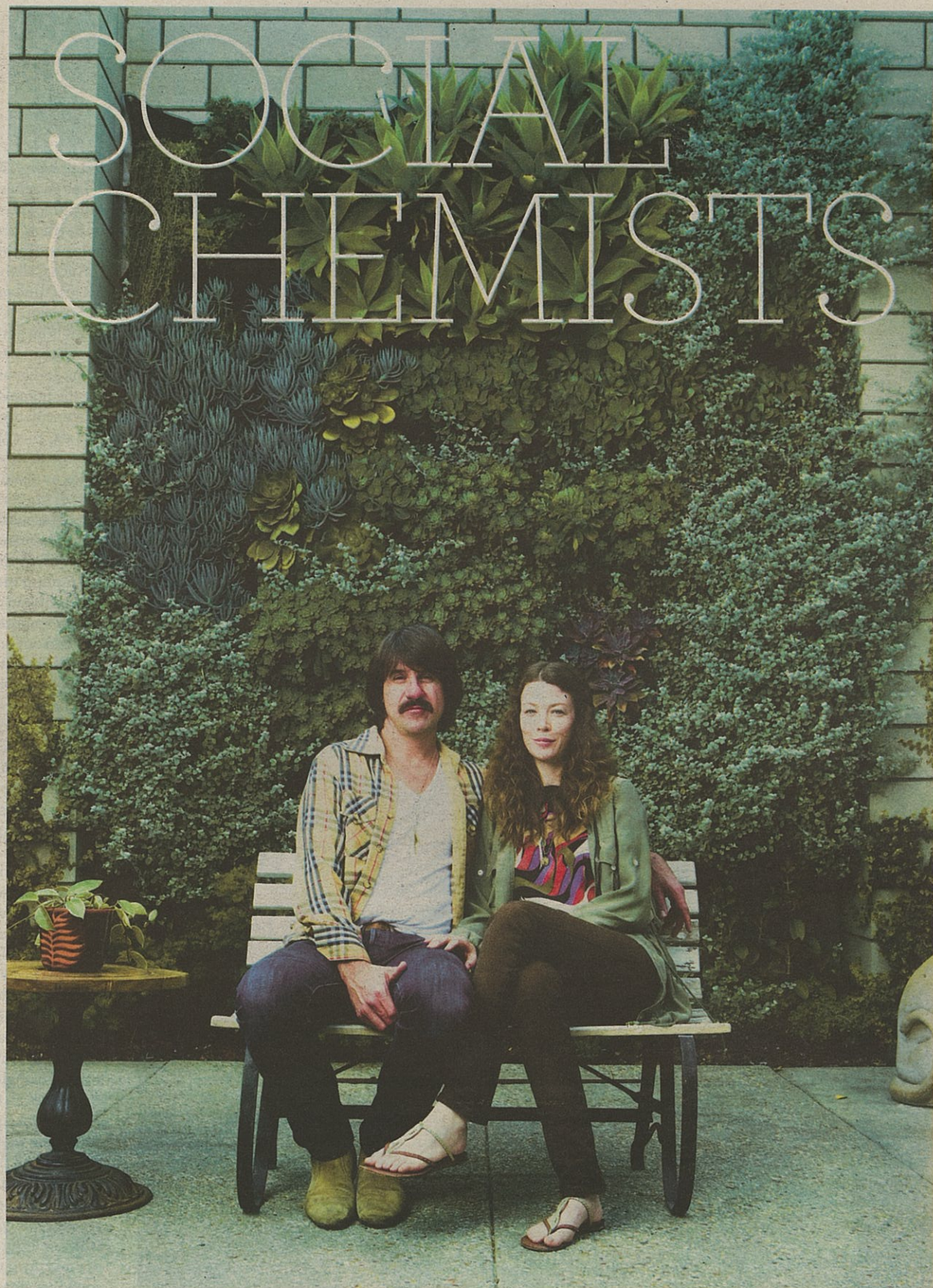
At heart, Nelson explains, the concept remains the same: "What happens is, I'll meet someone who has a dream or an idea. I'll glom on to it and fuck with it. And their dream gets fulfilled. The guy who played the piano, he got to play the piano, but there was more to it than that, it can definitely be a little risky."

When he threw a party called *Hot Lady Heaven*, guests had no idea what they were coming to. Naked and half-naked women frolicked and writhed to music as they led guests from room to room. The chefs from *Animal* rolled out a huge butcher block with a giant roast beast on it, and began carving slices and feeding it to the guests and tossing dripping hunks of meat to the women on the floor.

"It wasn't like a performance you paid to go to and sat and watched," says Nelson, pleased that his experiment worked, "you were a part of it and it only happened that night."

Last year, Nelson and Walsh embarked on another social study. "It was like an art experiment," says Nelson. "We said, 'Let's make the greenest fucking building possible.' Let's see what that is." The rental space is now known as The Smog Shoppe, located in Culver City, in an old car repair shop. Both Nelson and Walsh relished the task of keeping within the strict sustainable guidelines, since recycling is already part of their thrift-vintage aesthetic, and shopping for doors and accents at salvage yards is their idea of a good time.

The place has major eco bragging rights, including a storm-water to groundwater system, which filters rainwater from the



roof and awnings into a 12,000-gallon tank for watering plants and janitorial use. The building is 100 percent solar-powered. (In fact they make more energy than they use; the excess goes back to the grid.) All toilets and sinks are the lowest flow available, urinals are water-free, hand dryers the most efficient ones they could find. Vertical gardens (in Woolly Pockets designed by Nelson) climb courtyard walls, inside and out.

Nelson thinks of the new space as a private community center and encourages his neighboring art galleries to use it. Of course, it's a great venue for more hush-hush soirees. The latest invite-only experience at The Smog Shoppe was a multimedia dance séance called *Shiner*. It involved, among many things, a 1960s L.A. police car parked in the private courtyard, an intense choreographed group performance led by Sir Huffington (of *Sweaty Sundays*, the biweekly Silver Lake hipster workout), guests dancing on a 50-foot *Soul Train*-style runway that began in the back of a '66 Lincoln Continental, and two naked 5-year olds stomping grapes in barrels on top of a 12-foot art installation by visual artist Rya Kleinpeter — the grape juice was used in the evening's cocktail developed by Danielle Motor from *Hungry Cat*.

Walsh recently sat in the upstairs lounge at The Smog

Shoppe (which perhaps due to her desire to move into a mountain cabin, has the vibe of one, with wood paneling, plaid blankets, shelves lined with vintage picnic baskets, books and other retro rustic bric-a-brac). She tells me about the couple's latest venture — into parenthood. Their first child is due in October. But she hasn't had time to nest yet. "I've been so busy running our business," she says, and pauses, "... and of course getting sucked into Miguel's projects."

Those include imminent ones like the May 1 launch of *WoollyPocket.com*, Nelson's online store from which he'll sell 30 styles of his vertical garden pockets and breathable planters. Then there are projects that are still part fantasy, like *Marvimon Mojave*. This experiment involves busing 500 people (in biodiesel busses of course) out to the Mojave for a performance of UFOs, the stage set from *Close Encounters*, Nelson's own signature margaritas, the *Saturday Night Fever* dance floor, a kickin' sound system and a performance from an as yet undetermined rock band. Right now Nelson is tweaking the test tubes. "It's about 50 percent fantasy at this point," he says with a Wonka grin. "But 50 percent fantasy has an 80 percent chance of turning into 100 percent reality."

—Linda Immediato