



## Drinking with a Friend Puts the Art into the Art of Whiskey Drinking

By Margaret Waterbury / January 24, 2018

My line of work gives me ample opportunities to drink whiskey in unusual places. In the past six months, I've consumed whiskey on a boat, on a farm, at parties, in clothing stores, in industrial warehouses, and once in an under-the-sea themed dining room while whale songs played as I enjoyed a plate of canelés adorned with a tiny St. Andrew's Cross (thanks, Scotland). Yet until a few days ago, I had never tasted whiskey in the middle of an art gallery as part of an installation.

This month, Portland, Oregon's Elizabeth Leach Gallery is hosting an installation by artist MK Guth called Drinking with a Friend. It's a lot what it sounds like. With the goal of exploring the rituals around drinking whiskey, it's a participatory installation that invites people to make an appointment, bring a friend, and lift a glass together, right there in the center of the gallery.

I arrived with my husband, Andy, at 4 p.m. on one very dark, rainy afternoon. We were seated at a small, square table in the center of the gallery. A full decanter of whiskey, two hand-blown glasses, a narrow leather-bound book, and a bar towel embroidered with a quote from Aeneas MacDonal were placed in front of us. To begin, we were asked to read aloud "Get Drunk," by Baudelaire. Then, we were on our own, free to pour each other whiskey and talk without interruption.



*MK Guth's "Instructions for Drinking with a Friend" includes a hand blown and etched bottle of custom-distilled whiskey, two hand-blown whiskey glasses, an embroidered towel, and a book containing instructions for activating the piece packaged in a custom case. Dimensions variable, 14 x 8.5 x 5" box. An edition of 12. Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Leach Gallery.*

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

Before we arrived, the gallery had emailed us with instructions. We were asked to choose a topic different from what we typically talk about. Andy and I have been together for eight years, and it sometimes feels like we've covered every topic on earth at least a dozen times, so it took us a little while to come up with something that felt fresh. But eventually we settled on cars.

Neither of us are car people. We have a car, and we certainly use it, but the relationship is a utilitarian one, and the finer points of personal vehicle ownership have always eluded us both. We don't enjoy driving, we don't covet new cars, and our relationship with our wheels is a purely utilitarian one that rarely merits comment.



*My drinking companion reviews the instructions before pouring our whiskey. Photo by Margaret Waterbury, image copyright The Whiskey Wash.*

So we talked about cars. We started with our first cars, our families' cars, and the fact that both our dads are unequivocal car people. We touched on our generation's peculiar affection for #vanlife, then discussed Andy's several excursions to the Indy 500 as a kid, transported in a chartered bus full of automotive engineers like his dad. Although I can't remember why, there was a also brief foray into first professional and then semi-professional wrestling.

## CRISTIN TIERNEY

It's a strange feeling to talk candidly about regular life, the life of suburbs and careers and traffic, in an gallery, using full voices and not those hushed tones reserved for times when Art is on display. And it was a little awkward at first. Out of the corner of my eye I could see one of the gallery workers responding to emails, and I wondered if he found this particular installation annoying. At one point, a patron wandered in off the street, took a brief look around, and then departed. About halfway through our hour-long session, two guys walked through carrying a huge, colorfully painted abstract canvas.

But the awkwardness passed, and soon that familiar feeling of being lost in conversation overtook us. Galleries are the home of the rarified, but drinking together is an inherently egalitarian pursuit. Whiskey leads to a quick shedding of pretense; it's a fast road to connection, the surest way to shorten the distance between two people. Drinking together might be the closest thing our secular, nothing-is-sacred society still has that resembles a real ritual, in the sense that its highest purpose is to build community and cement existing ties. And the truly amazing part is it even works on people who've known each other for a very long time.

Oh. How was the whiskey? Not bad. On the bottle was an engraving informing us it was made by local distillery Indio Spirits and finished in sherry casks. At least, that's what it might have been; the instructions specified that the Indio spirit could be replaced with other whiskey if necessary. And honestly, the whiskey kind of felt like an afterthought, a simple footnote to the main meal of conversation. I'm sure there's a lesson in that for all us.