

# Atomic Cowboy Art Lounge



By Julia Smillie Carey

**I**t began, as these things sometimes do, with one orange plastic chair. At the time, Peter Venezia had no idea that the “groovy” seat he picked up on a whim was the handiwork of famed St. Louis architect and designer Charles Eames, whose collaborations with his wife, Ray, became synonymous with Atomic Age furniture. Nor did Venezia realize he had begun a love affair with mid-century furniture that would, nearly a decade later, serve as the nucleus of his Maplewood art lounge, Atomic Cowboy.

Since opening its doors this summer, Atomic Cowboy has quietly begun shifting St. Louisans' perceptions of coffee houses, martini lounges and art galleries. “We came up with the term ‘art lounge,’” Venezia explains, “because you can come here, drink some coffee or a martini, check out art and just kind of lounge.”

Deliberate clusters of sleek plastic chairs, kidney shaped coffee tables, sleek linear vinyl sofas with striking colors and subtle shaping create conversational “pods” throughout Atomic Cowboy’s deep, narrow interior.

Collections of 1950s televisions and radios dot shelves and ledges. A bright red wall at the back evokes the striking colors of the nuclear age, contrasted with stainless steel accents.

Venezia’s attraction to the pieces in his collection is fittingly organic – the same adjective adopted to describe the simple, flowing lines and shapes that dictate the look of Atomic America. “I love 1950s architecture,” he says, adding that his style is “minimal but modern,” with an emphasis on open space.

If the hallmark of 1950s design is the marriage of form and function, then Atomic Cowboy itself is very clever living testament to its genius. With an eye firmly trained on design, Venezia has created a space that is highly functional and sleekly adaptable.

By day, Atomic Cowboy’s spacious interior fills with natural light and provides coffee drinkers a breath of fresh air in its smoke-free environment. Toward evening, patrons are as likely to sip red wine as espresso and a soothing light emanates from large milky-turquoise glass orbs dangling above the blonde beech bar.

On the weekends, crowds mingle and groove to the sounds of DJs. All the while a practical sophistication rules as the two long, bright white walls on either side of the space showcase the work of local artists. Even the basement of this storefront serves a purpose. Here, Venezia houses select pieces of mid-century furniture available for sale.

And this brave, welcome business is in...Maplewood? What seems like an odd location is, of course, another deliberate part of Venezia’s overall design. “I didn’t want to be in the Loop or downtown,” he says, smiling. “If people like it, they’ll come. That’s all I care about.” ☘