



THE INTERSECTION OF ART, A  
STORYTELLING RAM, AND A  
HISTORIC AMERICAN CITY



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## NOT YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S EYE SHOP

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4 March 2017

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA – A man-figure with the head of a ram and a book in one hand tells a story to a group of captive woodland animals at the main fountain at Five Points South. Frogs squirting recirculating water back into the fountain bring sound to the merciful scenario.

The Satanic fountain, the vision of Birmingham-based artist Frank Fleming, lies at the heart of this city's club district and pays tribute to the Southern tradition of connection through storytelling.

One crosswalk away, a storefront display window crammed with creative expressions silently screams for attention. With curiosity provoked, one would not imagine the pleasant and surprising journey that lay on the other inside of the large glass window that leads to a museum of sorts.

With just one foot inside the door of this shop, I was already surprised. My first thoughts: Minimalist, cool and filled with amazing works of art. A pleasant surprise, to say the least and unexpected as the sign out front definitely didn't prepare me for what I was to see inside. Part museum but mostly an eyewear shop. After a quick 180-degree view to see if it merited further inquiry, which it did, the most pleasant visit to an eyewear store ever was about to begin.

## PROFILE



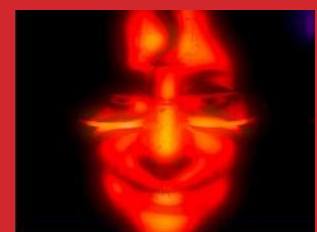
KRIS  
CHILDS.



BORN AND  
RAISED IN  
NEW  
ORLEANS.



MARRIED 20  
YEARS /  
SINGLE 28  
YEARS.



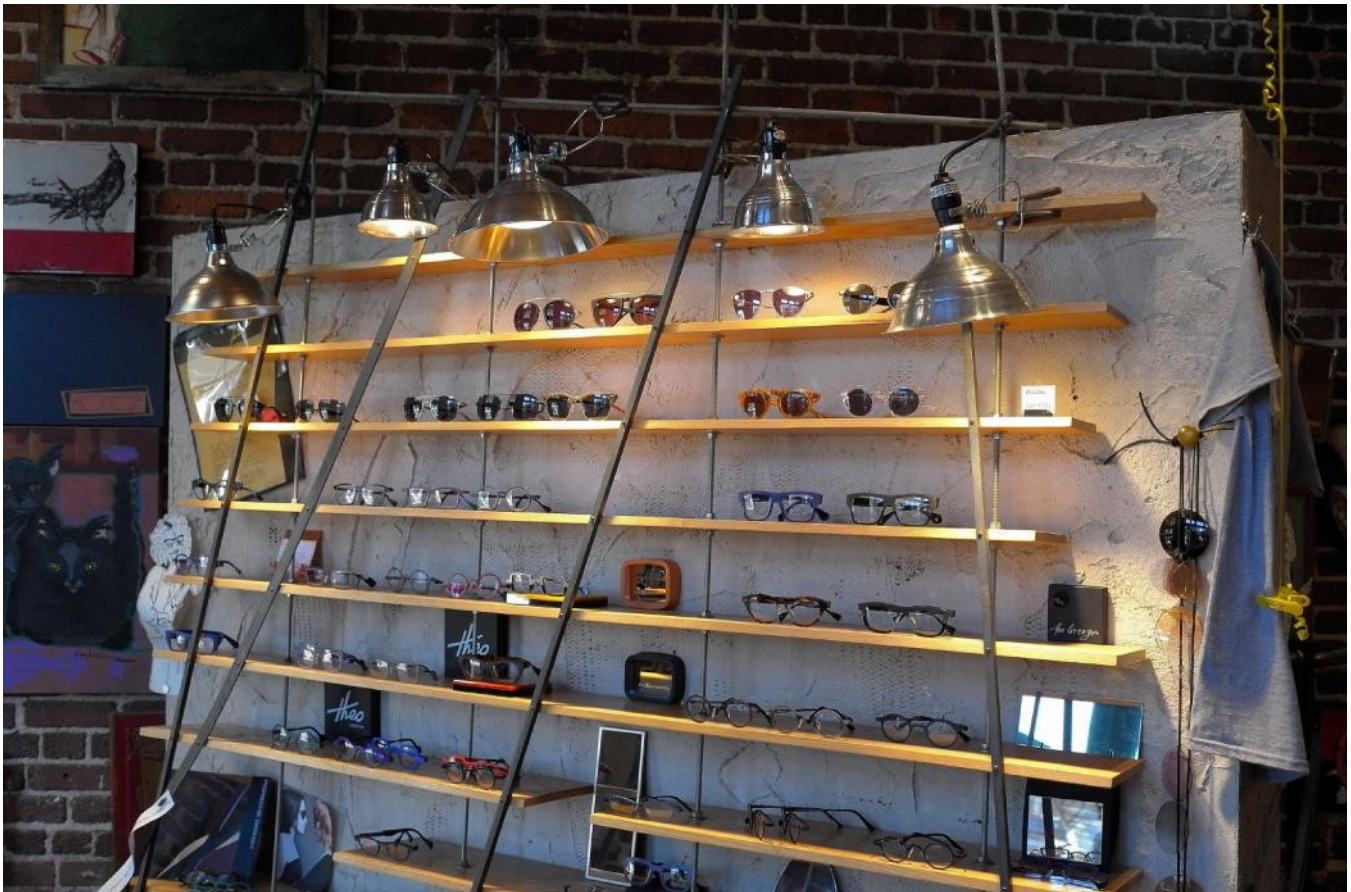


*Outside view of IIIS An Optical Shop in Five Points South. Photo credit: Pietro Donatello Pitts*

“Let a person know what’s in my sense of self and creative brain by allowing them to walk in and around it,” that’s the credo of New Orleans, Louisiana born-and-raised Kris Childs, owner of IIIS An Optical Shop. The shop is home to eyewear pieces for “modern people with different mentalities,” she says.

This little shop was opened in 1993 by Childs, 69, with her friend Jeff Barnes who remained a partner for 10 years. The shop, located in the heart of Birmingham’s first streetcar suburbs, Five Points South, is situated on a five-street corner where streetcar lines from downtown intersected with those from other residential areas. Other tenants that share the intersection included a church, landmark houses, apartments, and commercial buildings.

Despite 24 years in Birmingham, the steel city wasn’t the original location. Seaside, Florida was the original site which was abandoned. The shop is completely unique from head to toe, as anyone who enters will surely see.



*Display shelf inside of IIS An Optical Shop. Photo credit: Pietro Donatello Pitts*

## **WIDESPREAD APPEAL**

The Norwegians and other Europeans would surely love the layout of this space. Imagine an art gallery inside a maze. Old school black and white photographers would approve of the photos displayed haphazardly. Hipsters on fixed geared bikes and sporting long beards would easily be drawn in and attracted to the top eight pieces by designers from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, and the United States of America, among others. They could easily be visualized conversing about it all and more so while sipping on a latte from the neighboring coffee shop with a familiar green and white logo or on some French, Spanish or Chilean wine.

Yet, at the main entrance no agenda or calendar displayed upcoming exhibitions. There was not a person waiting for my admission fee before the walking tour began. Fair enough since IIS isn't an exhibition hall, at least not by the textbook definition of what a museum should be.

Despite its outward appearance, IIS An Optical Shop is just that, an eyeglass shop; however, like no other I have seen on my travels to fashion capitals like Paris, New York or even Barcelona.





*IIS employee Allison Drake showing off glasses on offer. Photo credit: Pietro Donatello Pitts*

This place is not for the thrifty spender. Once more, the type of patron that graces the glass door at the entrance is looking for something different and what will be a discussion piece whenever and wherever the glasses or sunglasses bought from this optimal shop are in use and on display.

IIS draws in a lot of what could be called fashionistas, GQ readers or people following the latest trends and fashion. Not surprisingly, the biggest volume of IIS clients is in the 40-60-year-old age group. While the hipsters and millennials make up a smaller percentage.

IIS' clientele is very largely gay and African American and tends to appeal to people who "are very stylish and care about spending the bucks to promote their persona," says Childs. Many are repeat buyers.

When asked about the most popular designs, Childs pointed out two.

"The Belgian THEO and the French ANNE et VALENTIN are among the most uniquely designed and executed frames globally and people flock to them. They offer unique individuality in expression of the wearer's personality and with enduring wear-ability and exceptional quality," she says.

What's most striking is that IIIS is tucked away in downtown Birmingham, and is just a short drive from the college campus that dominates the still-emerging portion of this city's newer city central, the University of Alabama at Birmingham or UAB, is known as a fine medical and research center.

"Because I grew up more of a free spirit in NOLA, it wasn't easy for me to 'fit in' with the Over the Mountain thinking part of Birmingham, although I lived there during married years," says Childs. "A small boutique on a sidewalk in a colorful neighborhood is the right fit for who I am and what I wanted to give to the city."

After the initial wow and confusing moment passes, one then realizes that yes, they do indeed sell eyeglasses and sunglasses here albeit not the ordinary boring types at the mainstream eyewear shops you were probably forced to visit with your parents in your pre-teen or teen years.

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*"I want people to see and feel the 'soul' of IIIS. Being visually intriguing and with some sense of wonder makes people relaxed and have fun. The people who enjoy the 'look' of cool eyeglasses as part of how they perceive themselves will continue to come." -- Kris Childs*

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## **AESTHETIC DESIGN**

Not far from Five Points South is the statue of Vulcan, the Roman god of fire and forge. The statue is a signature

Birmingham landmark and pays homage to the city's roots as a major iron and steel town. Birmingham is in the north central part of Alabama, mostly conservative and very much a part of the 'Old South' of the red belt states. The city -- located about 146 miles (235 kilometers) west of Atlanta, Georgia -- is mostly known for its importance in US history and its unforgettable contributions to the civil rights movement. The 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of the deadly racially-motivated bombing in 1963 that left four little black girls dead and many more injured, and which led to production of the Spike Lee film '4 Little Girls', is just a 5-minute ride down-hill from IIIS. The Birmingham Civil Rights Museum, located just across the street from the church provides visitors to this town with a better look into the city's interesting and often racially-divided history.

Back inside IIIS, free flowing designs dominate. Elongated galvanized drawers tuck away into what otherwise appears to be the base to a wall. Cutouts in wood paneling which ordinarily looks like support panels are used to hang coats and for displaying. Irregular shaped and sized counter surfaces at desk areas handle that area's work as well as allow various persons with clearance accesses. Pull down tables provide additional space when needed as part of 'finding clever solutions to big needs in small spaces.'



*Display shelf inside of IIS An Optical Shop. Photo credit: Pietro Donatello Pitts*

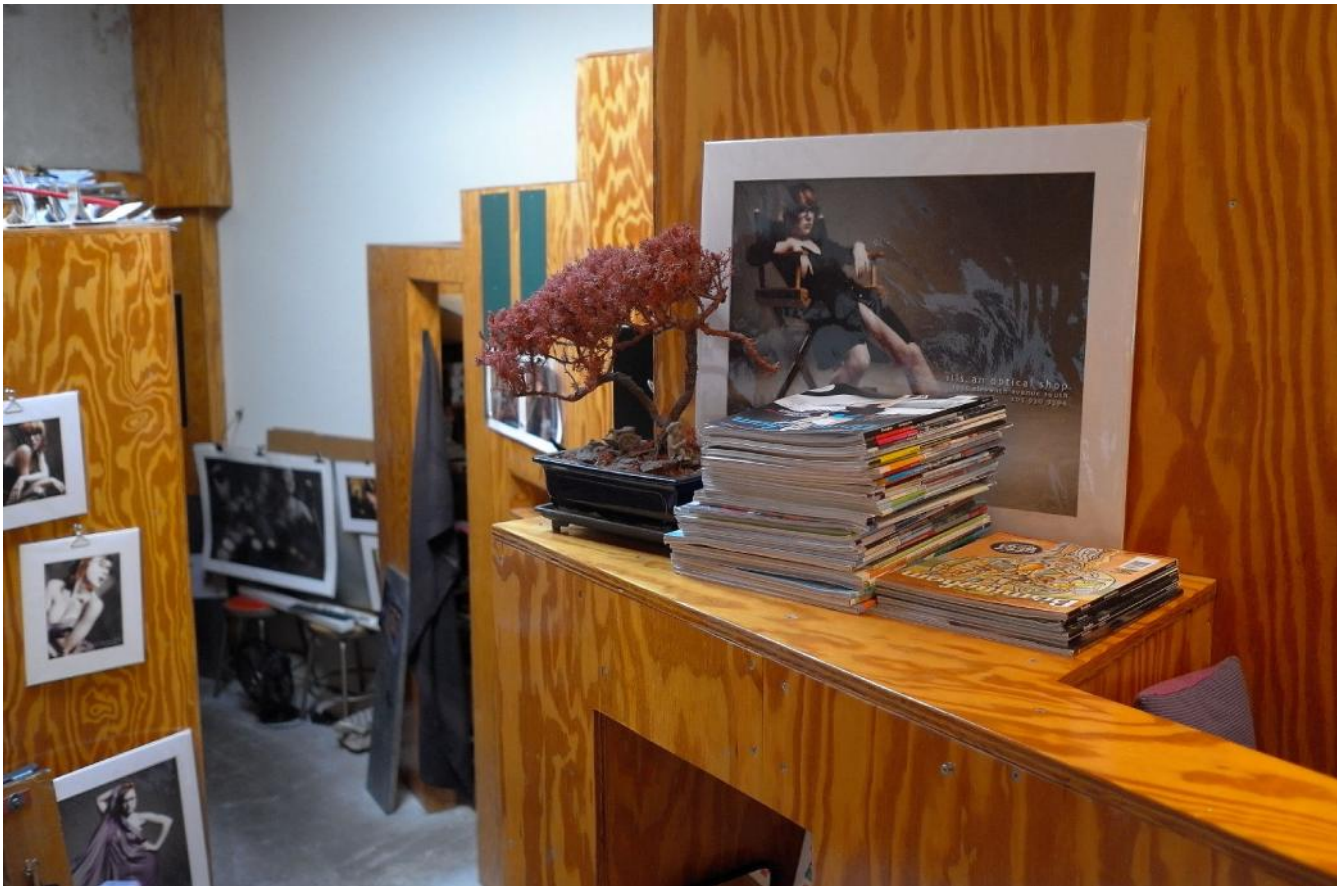
Childs designed the shop with the approval of an architect. She designed the light fixtures, furniture, and displays as well as the hooks, knobs, and mirrors. She also designed a line of eyeglass ‘hangers’ to hold glasses around a person’s neck when not in use on their face.

“My curious brain designed everything about the shop and fixtures et al,” said Childs who partnered with a local architect friend who approved important technical details and code issues. “I knew he’d let me have creative control.”

In another section, a chair miraculously forms out of what appears to be just two walls. A perfectly placed mirror provides whomever sits there a chance to see themselves. No pun intended. A couple of stairs down into another rear part of the shop underneath Childs’ desk area is a walk-in door that leads to a white hammock that secretly hangs below and provides a discreet place to nap when the time permits. Higher up, a throw rug on the bathroom floor secretly conceals a trap door that drops down into a storage space that is completely under the entirety of the elevated area and accessed from the rear of the shop.

“Because I wanted to find a way to utilize every square inch of the small space, “necessity is the mother of invention,” says Childs. “The hammock is for those 15 minute catnaps we all need sometimes.”





*Display shelf with magazines, photographs, and Bonsai inside of IIS An Optical Shop. Photo credit: Pietro Donatello Pitts*

## **LOCAL ARTISTS**

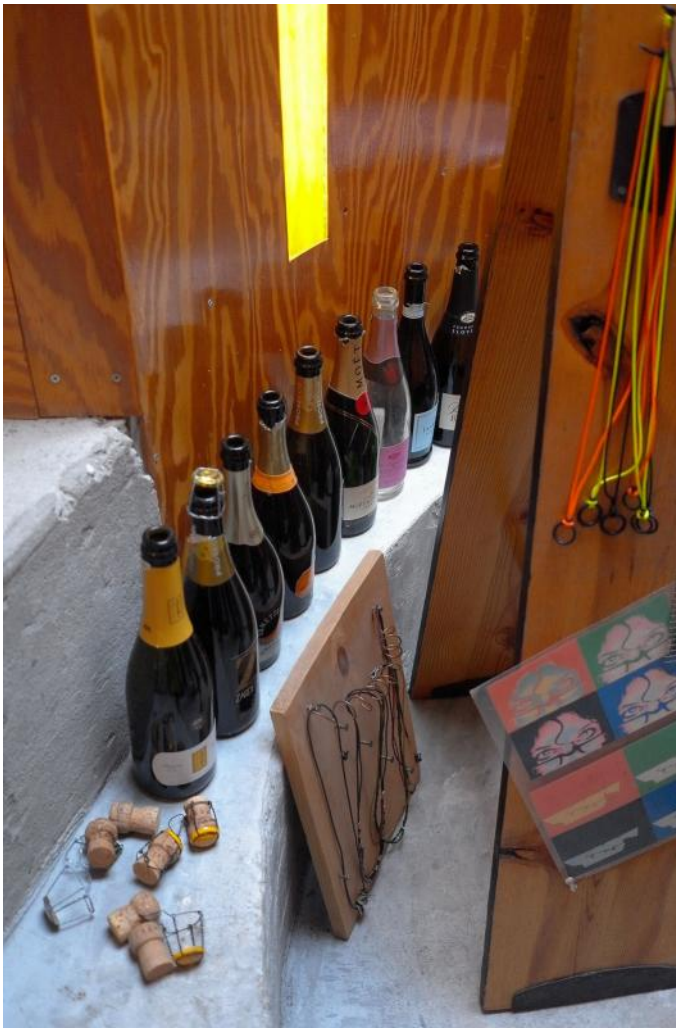
Sloss Furnace Company, US Steel, and other companies like them in and around the ‘Magic City’ have long closed. That hasn’t stopped the city from moving forward.

The city still boast of its baseball team the Birmingham Barons, albeit a minor-league affiliate of the Chicago White Sox. No surprise that American football in these parts still reigns. The annual Iron Bowl football game classic, which pits rivals Auburn University against the University of Alabama, is as much tradition as it is commercial. This state’s love affair with football could probably best be summed up with three words: Roll Tide Roll.

Rolling tree-topped hills, clean drinking tap water, and a laid-back lifestyle still has a crowd to draw on. The surroundings of the IMAX Theatre downtown and other sites and historical venues give new local artist an opportunity to forge the not so distant violent past with the emerging pleasures of this historic city. In essence, the New South bridges the new with the old.

My life is a collection of events and memories, so, it was natural for me to fall into the same pattern in the shop, says Childs, who also supports local artists.





“When I find a piece of their work that compliments the eyeglasses on the shelves,” she says, “I like to display empty prosecco bottles to signify how we celebrate life during any workday that causes us to open one.”

Childs uses any number of stockpiled materials and stuff as well as packaging and leftover remnants from projects such as metal slabs, odd shaped wood cuts, and so much more that is colorful and offering a playful full spectrum to stark and minimal.

It has been 24 years since IIIS opened its doors in Birmingham and Five Points South is still a happening place to hang out.

With such a clientele base and distinction, no wonder IIIS is not located in the corner of some uppity shopping mall.

“Big malls get big crowds. But that is not necessarily the customer base right for the business. And more people doesn’t necessarily mean more sales,” says Childs.

It was critical that I place the shop in an area that said ‘anybody from anywhere welcome.’ I wanted all the people of our widespread surroundings to find us in a location that didn’t fit a preconceived lifestyle, she says.

While other shops have left the area, including a store next to IIIS that had been there for years, it seems Childs has no intention of leaving Five Points South.

“I’ve been asked to open additional shops in quite a few different neighborhoods in town, but I will remain a ‘destination place’ with one brick and mortar IIIS only.”

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