Houston Loves Eccentrics

by Bill Arning

Production still from Trenton Doyle Hancock, Stephen Mills, and Graham Reynolds's ballet *Cult of Color: Call to Color*, 2008. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York, and Ballet Austin. Photo Tony Spielberg.

Robert Rauschenberg Foundation / Art in America Arts Writing Fellowship Essay

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I arrived in Texas in 2009 to direct the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston after a lifetime on the East Coast, and the first lesson I learned was that Houston loves eccentrics. It is, in fact, something of a tradition and likely why I have been able to thrive as a museum director here.

I've found Houston to be a progressive and intellectual city—a bright blue dot in a massive field of red. We have had an arts-friendly, out-lesbian mayor for the last six years. There are more artists' talks, lectures, performances, film screenings, and concerts than one could ever attend. This makes it easy to forget the regressive elements of the political machine working against equality and sanity in the state. But despite the truly heinous political realities—especially around guns and reproductive rights—there is broad bipartisan support for the arts. Even the conservative community brags about the city's openness to controversial art.

I was unaware when I moved here that Texans consider the state its own country, and that I would need to study its history—most of my fellows had already learned it in junior high school. Several books on the history of Texas art would be required reading as well.[1] It's no surprise, then, that the cultural landscape here is full of world-class attractions. Yet Houston is a cat city, rather than a dog city, meaning that its charms can make themselves scarce and do not come to you just because you express a passing

curiosity. The city requires a tour guide and a car. I hope this essay will serve as an introduction to a city that I find to be richer in artistic stimulation every year.

The double meaning of "rich" is intended, for the response T-shirt to the ubiquitous "KEEP AUSTIN WEIRD" is "KEEP HOUSTON RICH." For someone whose job description includes convincing wealthy Texans that supporting museums is a worthy and enjoyable philanthropic endeavor, a rich Houston is very welcome indeed. Most cities have a diversified funding base. Houston money all comes back to the oil and gas industry—directly or indirectly. Most general economic downturns are barely felt here due to the consistent cash flow of the petroleum business, as people keep driving their cars even when economically stressed. Cultural leaders in the city all have the price per barrel of oil in our morning news feeds, since it is the biggest single factor affecting the success of requests for support of important projects. Even during the 2016 sinkhole, there is money being made, but few capital campaigns will be launched until the market conditions change again.

Commitment to access to the arts is a beautiful thing to see in the city. When artist and musician Robert Hodge released a hip-hop single with Phillip Pyle II in 2014—the Black Guys' "The Menil Song" is about Hodge's discovery as a black teen of the always-free, heavily air-conditioned galleries at the Menil—it became an underground hit, giving me a prideful thrill. Hodge—who had a killer show at CAMH of his paintings that mix hip-hop phrases, slavery-era illustrations, and images from popular culture and European art history[2]—acknowledges that, for many in his community, museum-going is not part of life. But when he and his friends learned about Houston's free museums, they felt welcome and were happy to see their cultural histories represented on the walls.

Relocating to Houston in 1941—when the city could rightly be termed provincial—John and Dominique de Menil changed the terrain of cultural philanthropy, and to this day Houston's philanthropists hold the Menil model dear and emulate it in their own patronage. The Menils were involved in the founding period of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (1948), constructed the Rothko Chapel (1971), and helped the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, grow exponentially, before building the world-renowned Menil Collection, which opened in 1987.

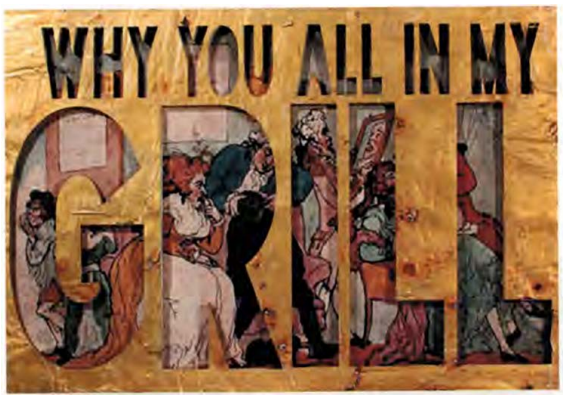
Add to these four institutions the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum, with its robust curatorial vision, and the city is well served by its museums, which have divided the contemporary art turf. We museum directors consistently cooperate to ensure that most major areas of investigation in contemporary art are on view in Houston within a year of their appearance in big art centers like New York, Los Angeles, London, or Berlin.

As a gateway city to South and Central America, and with the Museum of Fine Arts devoting significant resources to its Latin American program, Houston gets current art from the south quickly. Under the leadership of curator Mari Carmen Ramírez, the MFAH's Latin American department has created a solid system for exhibiting and sometimes buying Latin American works, and almost all the best collections in Houston have made significant acquisitions. In 2015, the Texas Contemporary Art Fair, held in the fall, mounted a survey of Mexico City galleries, leading many Houston collectors to prioritize Mexico City art fairs Zona Maco and Material Art Fair over New York's Armory this year. María Inés Sicardi started representing the great Latin American modernists, such as Carlos Cruz-Diez and Luis Tomasello, and politically engaged conceptualists, such as Liliana Porter and Miguel Angel Ríos, well before there was any market for their works in North America. Sicardi has also fostered the intricate, poetic practices of Mexico City's Gabriel de la Mora and Melanie Smith, both of whom have pieces in Houston collections.

Performance is huge here, and there are many festivals, such as the feisty Lone Star Explosion and the classic Dance Salad. Lone Star's last iteration remains infamous for the extremity of many of its presentations, which had one major foundation representative asking me if we should climb

Melanie Smith: *Aztec Stadium. Malleable Deed*, 2010, video, 10 minutes, 29 seconds, in collaboration with Rafael Ortega. Courtesy Sicardi Gallery, Houston.

Dario Robleto: *Harvest/Harvest Moon* (detail), 2014–15, cyanotypes of various moons in the solar system, crystals, paper, feathers, and mixed mediums, 30 by 69 by 16 inches overall. Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston.



Robert Hodge: *Why You All in My Grill?*, 2014, MDF and mixed mediums on reclaimed paper, 31 by 42 inches.

Earl Staley: *Portal Series #19*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 29 by 63 inches.

Alika Herreshoff: *The Passenger*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 24 by 20 inches. Courtesy Cardoza Fine Art, Houston.

View of Autumn Knight's performance *WALL* at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2016. Photo Max Fields.

into the performance area and force the performer to stop choking himself.

I see many performances all over the city, but I'm particularly proud of a couple we've presented at CAMH. In September 2014, Nathaniel Donnett responded to being racially profiled. Pulled over by the police some months before, he felt his life was in peril from the way the officer was aggressively questioning him, until the officer saw his two-year-old daughter in the backseat. For the performance, he imagined himself as another victim of police violence and staged his funeral service, with other artists delivering eulogies. This year, Autumn Knight, the only Houston artist in the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art's 2014 national survey, "State of the Art," staged her work *WALL*, consisting of sound, rituals, and actions that explore the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and the Galveston Seawall. At CAMH, black women sat in a row between the artist and the audience to represent the power of resilience in the face of trauma.

Music and art mix well and often in Houston. The blues musician Lightnin' Hopkins has a memorial bus stop not far from Project Row Houses, the long-running art organization and installation space in the historically black Third Ward neighborhood. Mark Flood began making art while still in the punk band Culturecide. Mayo Thompson, whose drawings were on view at Greene Naftali in New York in fall 2015, founded the conceptual psychedelic band Red Krayola here in 1966 with drummer Frederick Barthelme. Today, Indian Jewelry, a band in the psychedelic tradition, dominates the music scene. In the 1990s, DJ Screw (Robert Earl Davis Jr.) invented a deejaying technique in Houston in which sound is radically slowed down. DJ Screw's phrase "chopped and screwed" is used in Houston in diverse contexts—from recipes to poems and paintings—showing that his brilliant invention (the Houston version of Brian Eno's Oblique Strategies) can be employed across disciplines. DJ Screw died young (in 2000), but rapper Bun B has claimed his mantle. In outsider music, Jandek, the mysterious cult singer, will occasionally appear in underground showcases or the lobby of the Menil Collection.

Even though Houston has all this exciting stuff going on, almost any denizen of the city's art scene can recite the names of artists who have left—Earl Staley, Dash Snow, Will Boone, Jeff Elrod, Mark Lombardi, and Donna Huanca—but they will follow up with the reminder that "you don't need to do that now." Since my arrival, I have seen a steady upturn in artists who build lives here. Many seem to find that there is enough influx from the international art world to launch a career while maintaining a fairly high quality of life.

For non-natives, I have heard Houston described as a "flypaper city." You come to take advantage of one of the scores of culture-industry jobs or residency programs. Then, years pass while you avoid opportunities in other cities because it would involve a drastic decline in your standard of living. In 2014, artist and curator Steven Evans, whose wall paintings of disco-song titles from the '80s were among the stars of "Macho Man, Tell It to My Heart: Collected by Julie Ault" (2013–14) at Artists Space in New York, was lured to Houston from the Pace Foundation in San Antonio to assume the directorship of FotoFest, the international photo-based biennial. Some long-established Houston artists, such as the lyrical abstract painter David Aylsworth and conceptual sculptor Joseph Havel, came for short stays that extended for decades. Staley moved back, and other artists with international careers choose to keep Houston as their second home (Angelbert Metoyer, Amsterdam; Tameka Norris, Berlin).

Havel is also director of the Museum of Fine Arts Houston's Glassell School of Art and its well-respected Core Program, which offers residencies for art and art criticism and has allowed many great artists, curators, and writers to spend substantial time in Houston. Critics like Andy Campbell, already an art historian, came from Austin for Core and soon after started publishing insightful art writing internationally. He also made it his business to know the artists here well, and he deejays expertly under the name Dandy Campbell. The Galveston Artist Residency, started by artist Eric Schnell in 2008 after Hurricane Ike ravaged Houston's beach resort, provides more interaction with the broader art world.

Three internationally known artists who maintain their homes and studios

here, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Dario Robleto, and Mark Flood, don't seem to have much in common. One thing that links them is their eccentricity, their determination to encounter the art world on exactly their own terms. (All three have had or are going to have shows at CAMH.[3]) Robleto's studio is famously off-limits, even to his friends, family members, and dealers. He once described his ideal studio as a version of the Bat Cave, where he drives in and the rocks close behind him. Such a situation is all the better to make his alchemical magic, in which long-lost sounds are transformed into deliciously poetic objects.

Hancock's studio on the northern edge of the city is more sociable. Going there means entering the artist's delirious headspace, which is full of signature characters like the evil Vegan King, determined to rid the world of the joy provided by the Color Babies. His toy collection dominates the huge space and probably inspired his own toy designs. This seems fitting for an artist whose alter ego, Torpedo Boy, is a cartoon character he created as a child. For *Cult of Color: Call to Color* (2008), he worked with Ballet Austin to transform his dark vision into a narrative dance. Seeing the 2012 revival, I understood why the company took pains to advise parents that, despite the cute images on the poster, this show was not for easily scared kiddies, as the violence was disturbing.

Active on the global stage for fifteen years, Mark Flood typifies the individualistic Houston artist who stays in the city because it allows him total freedom. Flood does not remain in Houston to avoid the Machiavellian machinations of the art world; he is deeply engaged with how the art world functions. He recently completed a feature film, *Art Fair Fever*, in which a group of art students attend a fair to learn the ways of the contemporary art market, only to face a syndrome that involves foaming at the mouth and becoming obsessed with accumulating, rather than making, art. Known in the art world as singer Christeene, the actor Paul Soileau, from Austin's Rude Mechs troupe, plays a collector in the movie whose art holdings need to be surgically removed from his ass.

Flood has indeed created his own art world in his hometown, regularly hosting visiting dealers, curators, and collectors in his Houston Heights studio; he frequently shows them works by young painters in the city. His support has allowed many emerging talents, like the abstractionists Lane Hagood, Jeremy DePrez, Bret Shirley, and Alika Herreshoff, to exhibit at significant galleries in New York and London while living here.

Many of these emerging artists are affiliated with Cardoza Fine Art, in the Warehouse District, where Flood shows. The gallery, which has professionalized recently due to the intense art world interest in its stable, has started hitting the art fair circuit, debuting in 2015 at Texas Contemporary and Miami Project. Similarly, Hello Project, having opened as a wacky parasite space—a perfect white box one entered through the old-school Houston gallery McMurtrey—is currently looking for another location but continues to present artists like Hagood and Travis Boyer at art fairs. Keeping up with the dozen or so new, bare-bones spaces that have opened (Nicole Longnecker Gallery, Zoya Tommy Gallery, Scott Charmin Gallery, Box 13, and Aker Imaging Gallery) along with established venues (like Anya Tish Gallery, Gspot Gallery, Deborah Colton Gallery, Gallery Sonja Roesch and Barbara Davis Gallery)—is a full-time job.

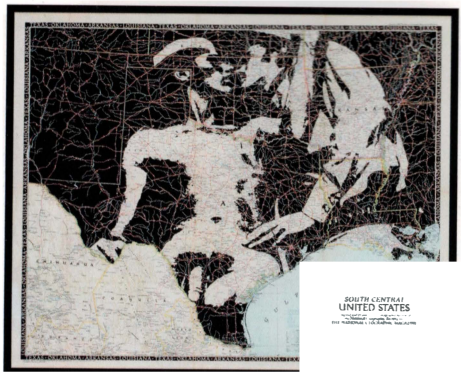
The three main blue-chip galleries in Houston—Texas Gallery, Hiram Butler Gallery, and McClain Gallery—are committed to discovering and promoting local art-makers as well. Garnering the lion's share of attention are Rachel Hecker, David McGee, Carl Palazzolo, Francesca Fuchs, and Susie Rosmarin at Texas Gallery; Kent Dorn, Shane Tolbert, and the duo Jeff Shore and Jon Fisher at McClain; and at Butler, the young digital demon Drew Bacon and the long-haul abstractionist Terrell James. This group is as diverse as you can get in terms of method, aesthetics, age, ethnicity, and marketability.

I recommend that out-of-town visitors start their journey at Moody Gallery. Betty Moody has devoted the last forty years of her life to the artists of this region and will explain their eccentric backstories. She tells irresistible tales of how artists like Terry Allen, James Drake,

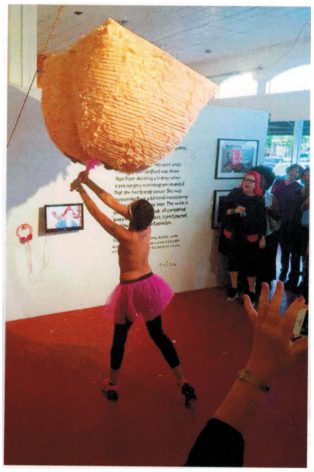
David McGee: *MoFo*, 2013, watercolor, tempera, and pencil on paper, 30 by 22 inches. Courtesy Texas Gallery, Houston.

Drew Bacon: *Stutter and Spill*, 2014, two-channel video, 15 minutes. Courtesy Hiram Butler Gallery, Houston.

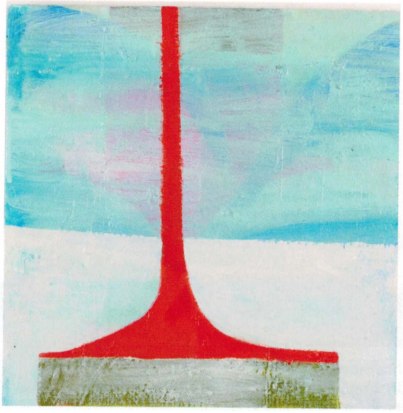
Debra Barrera: *Mount Pavlof, 2014*, 2015, graphite on paper, 18½ by 26¼ inches. Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston.



Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin: *South Central U.S.: Pinups*, 2014, acrylic on hand-cut found road map, 30 by 35 inches. Courtesy Devin Borden Gallery, Houston.



View of Thedra Cullar-Ledford's 2015 performance at Gspot Contemporary Art Space, Houston. Photo Sandy Wilson.



David Aylsworth: *Up With Which Below Can't Compare With*, 2015, oil on linen, 14 inches square. Courtesy Inman Gallery, Houston.

and Gael Stack (all with lo careers) as well as nature-focused P ge Kempner, quirky Mary McCleary, and el Randy Twaddle establi hed themselves in the state. When she brin in a younger artist, like Debra Barrera or Michael Bise—both of whom have embraced a masterful drawing technique to very disquieting ends—everyone takes notice.

On Main Street in midtown one can find Isabella Court, the city' central gallery complex, with Devin Borden Gallery, Art Palace, Samara Gallery and Inman Gallery. David Shelton (formerly on Isabella Court) and Art Palace relocated from San Antonio and Austin, respectively, for the greater playing field of confident, self-directed collectors in Houston, and will mix global players like Keith Mayerson in with the regional emerging artists. David Shelton found larger digs in the 4411 Montrose Building in January, and opened with a killer show by New Yorker Matthew Craven. Inman not only represents well-known painters like Aylsworth, but also the poetic photographer Amy Blakemore and political artist Jamal Cyrus, whose work has been shown at museums across the United States.

Devin Borden presents work by artists who have some Texas connection, even if it is just having family in the state or teaching here briefly. My personal favorites include Laura Lark's paintings, performances and ink-on-Tyvek drawings that engage with women's mediated fantasy lives, and the juicy paintings of Geoff Hippenstiel, known for their deliriously worked surfaces. Upcoming is a first commercial gallery exhibition by the duo Nick Vaughan and Jake Margolin, who traveled around the country investigating queer regional histories and gay marriage, and found that Houston was such an inviting place they have stayed (though they keep a residence in Tulsa as well). Their "Cut Map" works are labor-intensive tributes to the gay histories of many unlikely locations around the country. The maps focused on Texas reveal the role Houston played for the entire Gulf Coast region as a gay center. ot only was Houston akin to ew York or San Francisco in the scale of its AIDS crisis, but it also launched the test case overturning sodomy laws nationally (*Lawrence v. Texas*).

In Houston Heights, the leafiest area of a city not known for its natural beauty, there are funkier galleries. Gspot is run by a true Houston art eccentric named Wayne Gilbert, who is an artist himself. His own work takes the form of painted meditations on human individuality and mortality, made with pigments that he mixes with unclaimed human ashes from funeral homes. His roster of artists is similarly idiosyncratic. In April 2015, Thedra Cullar-Ledford presented a wildly humorous, angry, politically informative exhibition about her recent mastectomy, offering a feminist response to the male medical establishment telling her how one is supposed to feel regarding one's cancerous breast tissue and one's body after surgery. She had a giant piñata being beaten by women who have refused reconstructive surgery that exploded with stickers that read "FUCK CANCER."

New Orleans is Houston's nearest big-city neighbor to the east, and it makes for a weird mirror image. Houston is future-focused, while New Orleans is all about preserving the past. The artists who choose to be based in Houston are plugged into art happenings globally but do not worry about cities like New York and Los Angeles on a daily basis. Over the last decade, Houston has often been compared to Los Angeles during the mythic period in the late '60s when it began to manifest its own artistic identity, going through a period of not caring what New Yorkers thought about its homegrown genius art-makers. Houston's pride and self-confidence, despite the free-fall in oil prices, are at a high point today, so perhaps we are an art scene ready to welcome curious outsiders into our wondrous realm—yet totally on our own Texas terms. ○

1. Katie Robinson Edwards's excellent *Midcentury Modern Art in Texas* (University of Texas Press, 2014) is but the most recent example and should be required reading for anyone interested in how vibrant art communities arise outside of art centers.
2. "Robert Hodge: Destroy and Rebuild," organized by senior curator Valerie Cassel Oliver, was at CAMH, Oct. 3, 2014–Jan. 4, 2015.
3. Robleto had a show in 2001 before I arrived. Hancock's drawing retrospective, organized by Valerie Cassel Oliver, just finished a four-city tour. Flood is currently preparing his second large-scale museum exhibition—his first in Houston—at CAMH for April 2016.