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Letter from San Antonio

by Franklin Sirmans

Contemporary Art *Month*? Could I be in socialist Europe? No, it's the heartland of capitalist America! Specifically, San Antonio, one of the country's fastest-growing cities, where I attended the San Antonio Convention and Visitors Bureau's presentation of Contemporary Art Month.

Downtown around town

As you can imagine, such a populist smorgasbord of exhibitions and special events is bound to feature plenty of amateur work. Here, the universal Sunday painting is given special piquancy by the exoticized locale. For instance, Native American scenery against bright purple rays of light. Such work was easily found in galleries in the center of the city, where business is booming in the afterglow of this past year's NCAA basketball tournament.

I had better luck at Parchman Stremmel gallery, where paintings by San Antonio artists Gary Sweeney and Cesar Martinez were on view along with the sculptures of Sharon Kopriva. Sweeney's paintings of maps *Texas -- Why I Love Her* are tongue-in-cheek homages affectionately applied to cities. Martinez's large oil-on-canvas paintings depict isolated character actors from the '50s brought to life in bold and colorful portraits. And Kopriva makes scary figures using real bones, human and otherwise. A story goes that one sculpture on display at the home of a wealthy patron so frightened a maid that she called the police.

Blue Star

San Antonio's alternative scene is full of surprises. At Blue Star is "Inside the Loop: Blue Star 13," the 13th annual exhibition of selected San Antonio artists. This edition is curated by Blue Star's new director, Carla Stellweg, who for years ran a New York gallery specializing in South American artists. Here she has put together a vivid document of contemporary art practices. The highlight of the exhibition is the work of Dario Robleto, who displays a roomful of his most recent objects. Robleto's work explores links between "sampling and democracy, economics and turn-tablism, oppression and the tactics of a DJ." The work is often romantic and arduous in its production, but he makes it all look so painfully clear using everyday objects as markers for his discourse. *Polar Soul*, a grid of 45 rpm record paper sleeves, recalls the grid of Minimalism while referencing the passage of time through the death of technology (45 rpm records) and its rebirth in the form of the CD. Placing it in a fictional continuum, all of the titles avoid unnecessary nostalgia by Robleto's invented band names and song titles.

It Sounds Like They Still Love Each Other to Me is a sculptural tribute to the romance of Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love.

Comprised of foam earplugs cast from melted vinyl and resin, the left ear plays Nirvana's *From the Muddy Banks of the Wishkah*, while the right plays Hole's *Live Through This*. Also on view, works by Philip Avila, Jannette Morales, Justin Boyd and Mike Addikison that were especially impressive.

ArtPace

ArtPace's growing program of international, national and regional residencies has acted as a continuously running fountain of art from all over the world. Past artists who have had residencies there include Xu Bing, Anya Gallaccio, Glenn Ligon, Esko Manniko and Tracey Moffatt. The current offering is work by the young Canadian artist Marcel Dzama. Dzama's show is a classic "artist's suitcase" exhibition, with hundreds of small drawings displayed on the walls. If you like to live with art and you don't have deep pockets, these are gems from an artist to watch. His psychologically charged cartoons are witty, ambiguous and idiosyncratic, populated by dogs with human heads, bears with drawn guns and the like.

The Big City Museum

The San Antonio Art Museum is in the midst of a huge expansion that will add 30,000 square feet for the new Rockefeller Center for Latin American art. Considering the city's cultural heritage and ethnic makeup (55.6 percent Hispanic), a Latin wing was a sure thing. The center is to be unveiled in October with an installation of art that spans 3,000 years from 1000 BC to the present. The San Antonio museum's senior curator and curator of Latin American Art Marion Oettinger is in charge of the installation. The

Rockefeller family contributed substantially to the new wing, not only in funds but also Nelson Rockefeller's collection of over 2,500 pieces, donated in 1979 to the museum by his daughter Ann Roberts.

Currently on the view in the museum's main gallery is "Collective Visions," put together by contemporary art curator Aida Zorilla. Zorilla has taken an unusually democratic approach. He's invited eight local artists to display their own work along with a piece from the museum's permanent collection and a work by another local artist who is not represented in the museum collection. The artist-curators include Jesse Amado, Constance Lowe and Cesar Martinez.

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