

Noah Simblist, *Conspicuous Production*.
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DALLAS REVIEW

Conspicuous Production: The First Two Years of the UTD/SouthSide Artist Residency
McKinney Avenue Contemporary

Noah Simblist

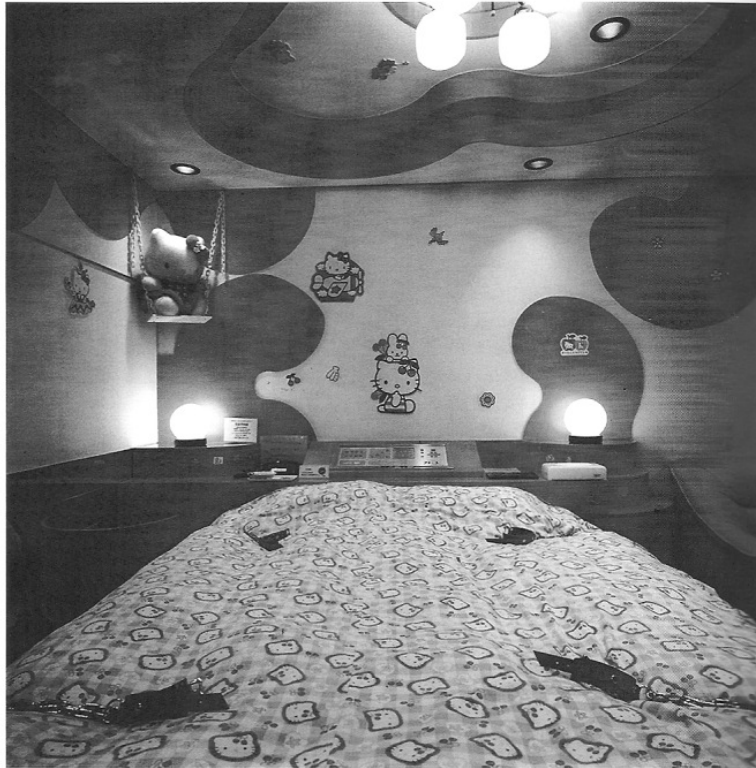
In 1997, developer Jack Matthews purchased a vintage 1910 Sears Catalog and Distribution facility. Since then, the building has transformed into SouthSide, a ready-made community complete with a coffee house, corner store, video rental outfit and bar. In the facility's former docking area is a set of studios, which are given to artists—rent free—for one year at a time.

The gift of time and space is incredibly important for an artist, and for the past two years Richard R. Brettell, Professor of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Texas at Dallas, and Karen Weiner, Manager of the SouthSide Residency, have chosen all participants. *Conspicuous Production* at McKinney Avenue Contemporary reflects the artists and their work that have passed through the residency to date. As a result, the show is more about documentation than an idea-driven, curatorial undertaking. It is, at times, a bit disjointed, but there are subtle trends that may come from a hidden curatorial voice: that of the individuals who chose these residents in the first place.

SouthSide has always seemed like a place that seeks currency—cultural or otherwise—and some artists in the show exhibit the traits and trends of the art world at large. Drawing, for instance, has become more prevalent in recent years. Baseera Kahn's *ka tink* is beautifully enigmatic, teeming with dreamlike swirls of color that accumulate into vague forms, hands and arms emerging from clouds. This kind of fantasy imagery echoes the widely exhibited work of Henry Darger, Marcel Dzama, Ruby Osorio and Amy Cutler, among others.

Other works expose the synchronicity between SouthSide artists and global trends by emphasizing the relationship between art and technology. Christopher Jagers' *Room*, for example, is a black and white painting created from digitally manipulated photographs of architectural spaces rendered into vinyl stencils. Jagers then stencils layers of ultra-smooth car paint with painstaking care. The resulting image is almost abstract, free of any trace of human touch. Technology is also key in Paul Slocum's *Color Sequencer*, a series of Atari consoles reprogrammed to play gibberish video games. With their monitors turned to the wall, the piece seems like an exercise in retro-technology chic rendered doubly obsolete.

Most interesting, however, are works that reference the idea of residency itself—the relationship

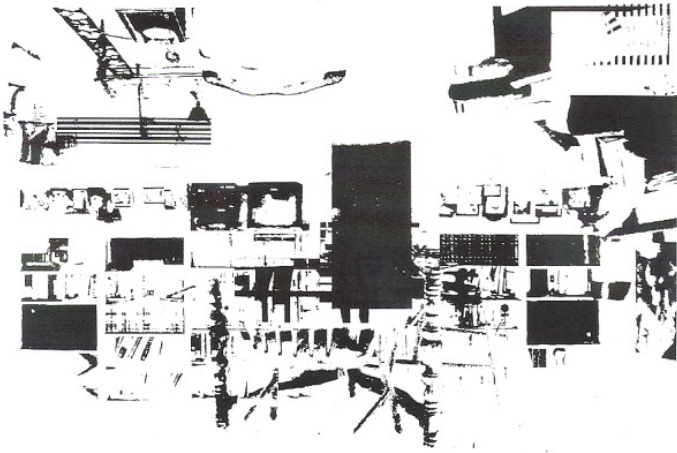


Misty Keasler, *Hello Kitty S&M Room, Hotel Adonis, Osaka, Japan, 2004*
C-print
19 x 19 inches
Courtesy Photographs Do Not Bend Gallery, Dallas

between artist and audience played out in strange dialectic of public and private. SouthSide residents have small, ground floor spaces that resemble storefronts. As a result, there is a fishbowl-like quality to their daily life. In this sense, the residency is a stage and the exhibition at the MAC is an extension of this performativity. In *Wooden Donkey*, Stephen Lapthisophon hastily scrawled the message BRECHT WAS RIGHT in black and white on four feet of cardboard. Lapthisophon's economy of means reflects the measured theatricality of Bertolt Brecht—a Marxist playwright—and, at the same time, provokes the question, "right about what?" Could he be referencing the infamous Brecht quo-

otation, "What if they held a war, and no one came? Why then, the war would come to you." If so, the work seems like an allusion to terrorism as the new norm of warfare—or, perhaps, Lapthisophon is alluding to the Brechtian idea of epic theater—a format in which the audience is encouraged to be as critical of themselves as the action on stage. If the latter is true, Lapthisophon treats the gallery as a stage, and *Wooden Donkey* acts much like one of Brecht's famous placards, breaching the passiveness of the viewing experience.

Also playing with the tension between the fictionalized and the real are Misty Keasler's photographs of love hotels in Osaka, Japan. There are around 200,000 such hotels with themed rooms, which are rented by actual couples—not prostitutes and johns. Keasler's images are devoid of human presence, populated instead by various fetish objects: Hello Kitty kitsch and handcuffs,



Chris Jagers, *Dream House*, 2003
 Polymer on canvas
 84 X 120 inches
 Courtesy the artist

school uniforms and chains—symbols of both innocence and its transgression. These photographs cut to the heart of sexual fantasy: it is not about flesh or physical pleasure. It is about symbolic actions and the sensuality they command.

Shin Yu Pai's *Notes from a Love Hotel Diary* frame Keasler's photos in vinyl text, traversing the boundaries of private and public. One entry reads,

Picked up on the internet. 6.5 emails. Invited her here for a sporting event. She had a baby face, but she had a really hot body. She gave me a D cup and had a really slender waist. She gave me a good blowjob too. I think she's a keeper, at least for now. She got really wet while we were just kissing. Two hours later, she put on her school uniform and rode home on her bike.

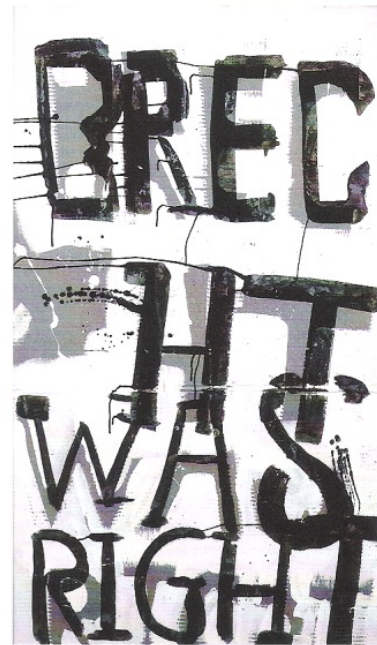
The implied pedophilia of this statement moves beyond Keasler's photos in an obviously disturbing manner, lending a menacing voice to otherwise anonymous fantasies. Nonetheless, it is the most interesting curatorial gesture in the show.

True, there is always an element of perversity in showing work made privately and placed into

the public sphere, where an artist's obsession for materiality or fetishized subject matter is, in turn, offered for the pleasure of the viewer. This sort of consensual voyeurism is furthered by the very idea of a show predicated on the living spaces of artists. So, *Conspicuous Production* is, in many ways, an apt title for this exhibit.

SouthSide artists come from a range of locales: five are international, five national; two came from other cities in Texas and twelve are from the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. Upon arrival, they shared two primary things: experience in an increasingly globalized art world and the more immediate experience of living and working in close proximity. The nature of the work they created is laid bare as cultural production. But SouthSide has also fallen into a trap similar to many residency programs: in its constant rush toward the new, it inadvertently advocates a particular breed of artmaking.

One medium conspicuously absent is painting. Chris Jagers and Ludwig Schwartz are rarities in this regard, and yet, it seems like even they were included because of their anti-painting



Stephen Laphisqphon, *Wooden Donkey*, 2005
 Ink & acrylic on cardboard
 53 x 31 inches
 Courtesy Conduit Gallery, Dallas

approach—Jagers' use of digital techniques and Schwartz' mechanized means of production. Could the scarcity of painting at SouthSide be because of painting's perceived conservatism or supposed supremacy in the art market? Perhaps SouthSide's uniformity is due to the fact that the same people select residents each year. The program thereby yields to the particularities of personal taste, unlike many residencies such as Yaddo, Artpace San Antonio and the Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation, which invite outside jurors and curators to screen applicants. In any event, Brettell and Weiner have given an invaluable gift to some very interesting artists. And at the very least, *Conspicuous Production* reminds us that these artists have been given the opportunity to be both more conspicuous and more productive.