

Art

State of the Art

Texas inspires exceptional artists at the CAMH

BY TROY SCHULZE

At a group exhibition called "Nexus Texas," featuring works by artists who currently reside and work in the state, you might expect imagery soaked in Lone Star iconography and mythology, or works that generally name-check the soil on which they grew. That's thankfully not the case at the new Contemporary Arts Museum Houston show, which is surprising for its lack of any sort of Texas cliché. But then, the title stresses the simple, focused connection on display: Texas inspires exceptional artists.

CAMH senior curator Toby Kamps outlines several examples of why this is true in the exhibit catalog. From demographics, geography and logistics, to politics, history and culture, Kamps — a recent transplant from Cincinnati — pinpoints and defines the sentiment natives have long felt: There's just something about Texas. "In the large and beautiful universe of Texas art," writes Kamps, "this exhibition represents a single constellation, an evocative pattern that suggests a larger whole." It's the perfect description of "Nexus Texas" — it's like a drawing on a constellation map, in which the star pattern serves as a skeleton for its nebulous mythical character.

Some of the only ostensibly Texas-inspired work (there's very little) comes from Houston's El Franco Lee II. His paintings freeze explosive, mostly infamous, moments in sports and urban culture. *Rudy T. Vs. Kermit Washington* captures "The Punch" that reverberated through the sports world on December 9, 1977. In Lee's colorful, acrylic canvas, the long arm of the L.A. Lakers'

Washington impacts the face of the Rockets' Rudy Tomjanovich, while umpires blow whistles and call time-out and players brawl and rush to Tomjanovich's defense. It represents one of the most frightening moments in basketball history. Another punch lands in *Little Flip Vs T.I.*, an almost portrait-like staging of the notorious fight between Houston rapper Lil' Flip and T.I., a rapper from Atlanta. Bling, tattoos, guns, Hummers and basketball jerseys all contribute to the almost cartoonish imagery. Lee seems to be emphasizing the absurdity of violence and materialism in an art movement.

Technology looms large in Texas, so it's no wonder artists choose to explore it. Paul Slocum's performative objects combine antique electronic devices with pop music and digital imagery. For *Combat*, Slocum hacked a 1977 Atari 2600 console and the game it came packed with (*Combat*). By adding code to the game and its music player, Slocum creates a loopy, self-deconstructing cyberpunk symphony, visually matched by the game's video, which flashes hypnotically through its game levels at breakneck speed and in vivid color. Directly to the left is *Dot Matrix Synth*, an

old Epson dot matrix printer transformed into an outrageous musical instrument/picture maker. Pressing a variety of buttons causes the printer to speed up or slow down, producing an assortment of tones. Viewers are invited to "rock out" with *Combat on Dot Matrix Synth* while it prints seemingly random images that reveal themselves when viewed from a bit of a distance. It's hilariously wild (and especially appreciated by this '70s-raised boy).

Music is a major element of Justin Boyd's eerie sculpture/installation. On the floor, an old reel-to-reel tape recorder plays a droning recording of a female voice — kind of a long, wavering moan. Impressively, the tape spools have been

attached to wooden pyramid frames which flank the recorder and elevate the spools. The two frames span a distance of about ten feet. The tape itself is effectively fed into the air, creating a huge, stretched-out triangle. The sound is weirdly enhanced by the visual effect of the tape shivering in the air, like the sound is vibrating off the tape itself. Affixed to the recorder is a small metal label bearing the piece's title, *Revelation Through Repetition (Vocal Thread Mix) Ecstatic Exhales and Anguished Yodels of American Folk singers timestretched into a continuous braid of exploration*, which pretty much encapsulates the work.

One piece by Gary Sweeney represents the playfully provocative and political side of Texas art. Employing colorful, high-school-athletic-jacket letters, Sweeney mocks and compares both adolescent rivalry and religious fanaticism by arranging the letters to spell "WEVE GOT SPIRIT YES WE DO WEVE GOT SPIRIT HOW ABOUT YOU" across a split panel

of images; on one side, screaming South Carolina basketball fans, on the other, fist-pumping Islamic jihadists. It's a bit smug, maybe, in its simple distillation of politics, but it's also powerful and funny.

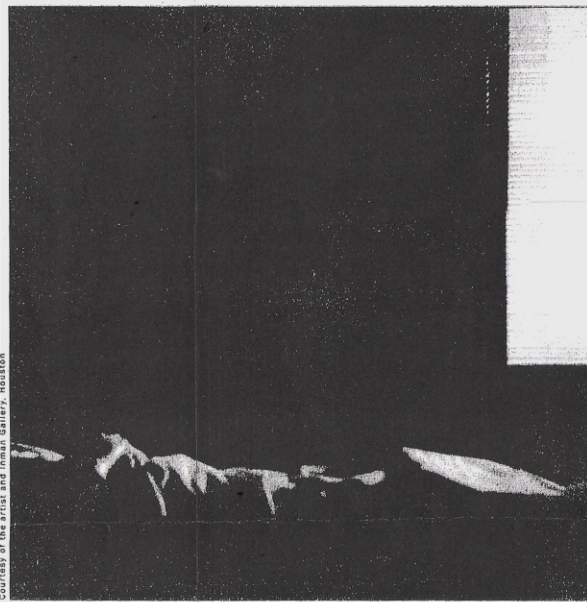
"Nexus Texas"
Through October 21.
Contemporary Arts Museum
Houston, 5216 Montrose,
713-284-8250.

Amy Blakemore's striking photos convey an inexplicable sadness. Is it the square frame produced by the cheap 1960s Diana camera she uses, which seems to concentrate the image? Or is it the short depth of field that compresses the picture against itself? Whatever it is, there's an incredible amount of stress in these elusive shots of mostly ordinary subjects. Most melancholy is *Dad*, a photo of Blakemore's father in his hospital bed just minutes after he died. Elegantly composed, it almost comes across as a painting.

And not to be missed is Roberto Bellini's video *Landscape Theory*. As Bellini is videotaping birds and a sunset in a parking lot outside Austin, a security guard approaches him and advises he turn off his camera and leave. "People are kinda edgy about getting

their picture taken," warns the guard. Bellini responds, "I'm sure the birds won't mind, will they?" "No," says the guard, "but the people in this computer company right here do." The discussion is amiable, but it reveals paranoia. Terrorism is never mentioned in the conversation between Bellini and the guard, but its presence is palpable. Imagery of grackles swarming in a parking lot and a vapor trail from an airliner remind us that our everyday context may have irreparably changed.

Bellini's piece is a good way to wrap a viewing of "Nexus Texas." There are no cowboys at the end of *Landscape Theory*, but there's that beautiful Texas sun setting on the most fertile landscape in America. ☉



Amy Blakemore's melancholy, elegant photograph *Dad* almost comes off as a painting.