

Texas Biennial: Houston

By Wendy Vogel

During a Texas Biennial panel discussion on regionalism at the Blanton Museum two weekends ago, *Los Angeles Times* art critic David Pagel asked with a smirk, “Is art from LA supposed to be all sunshine and rainbows, and art in Texas rusty and...brown?” While many Austin venues playing host to the curated portion of the Biennial resist such narrow conscription, the works on view at artist-run space Box 13, the only Houston location, do share some formal similarities. Sprawling and scrappy, the exhibition encompasses a range of sculptural practices in an earthy palette. The most enjoyable moments don’t arise from a sense of visual cohesion, but rather when individual works confront the space’s unlikely architecture, a former sewing machine factory in the Second Ward.

Visitors are greeted by an installation in Box 13’s sizable window space by Timothy Harding, *Don’t Forget to Dot the I in Power* (2010). Large charcoal drawings of abstract scribbles adorned with shiny tape are bent architecturally around blinding neon lights in a contemporary mix of Flavin and Arte Povera. While the work’s title and the artist’s website statement suggest some larger critique of individualism and corporate sloganeering, I didn’t read it explicitly in the work. Formally, however, its placement in the barred window space is effective, drawing attention to the space’s quirks and its function without the need for excessive signage.

In contrast to Harding’s theatrical beacon, the works in Box 13’s first floor gallery appear like humble props. This is certainly true for Brad Tucker’s *Stretch Fabric* (2010). Adjacent to the wrapping wooden staircase and divorced from the context of the sets of Tucker’s “Bad Trucker” performances, the accordion-like structure looks like a forlorn undersized baby gate. Olivia Moore’s *Double* and *Frame* (both 2009), an unusually thick stand-in for a headboard and a reupholstered bed frame missing an inlay for the mattress, subtly upset one’s expectations for the two domestic objects but remain puzzlingly free of irony. Cassandra Emswiler’s floor-bound sculpture, one-half of an installation in Houston and Austin, fares better. A grid of cheap linoleum panels with cheesy references to natural motifs such as flowers and marble are rhythmically overlaid with shells, rocks, skulls and other organic materials. Like a

contemporary twist on Smithson's nonsites that critiqued the "neutrality" of the gallery space, Emswiler's piece gains a funny factor when set upon Box 13's oh-so-'70s linoleum floor.

Laurie Frick's installation beckons viewers up Box 13's dramatic stairs and onto the second floor. Resembling an overhead city grid created from cut-up pieces of discarded cardboard boxes, *A long walk through cardboard* is simple, site-specific and very engaging. I became fascinated in trying to decode the found poetry of her brand-name labels. Once on the second floor, my eyes traveled upward to the space's composite board ceiling and tangle of spotlights, breaking the illusion of the piece in an unexpected yet honest way.

At Box 13, the Texas Biennial installation offers a refreshing and unapologetic look at one of Houston's weirdest art spaces. For this, it is a success: because if not for celebrating Texas weirdness, in all its manifestations, what is the Biennial for?