



Talking Curation with Art Alliance Austin's Asa Hursh

Lora Reynolds Gallery's exhibition of work by Troy Brauntuch, Andy Coolquitt, and Jeff Williams proves a good case study in putting together an art show

by Seth Orion Schwaiger
Friday, August 21, 2015



"Do you see it?"

"No, I've got nothing." I stare at a vertical rectangle of rich midnight blue colored over in parts by equally even, cloudy gradients of rusty umber. "I can feel there's something there, I can sense the space, but"

"It's right there! Here's an anatomical model, a torso in profile with its shoulder rolled back; there's the women's shoe on its point; and there's the softball," says Asa Hursh gesturing at the Brauntuch on the wall. I've asked him to talk about contemporary curation in Austin, and this is how we start. The image snaps into view as he speaks. "It's a still life - a slightly erotic one as still lifes go - but because you can't immediately grasp the imagery, the work also remains an object, and that sends you back into the sculptures from the other two artists that surround it while hopefully maintaining in the viewer - you - that same mode of searching throughout the experience. It's very clever as an artwork, but also as a curatorial technique."

We are standing in Lora Reynolds Gallery admiring works by Troy Brauntuch, Andy Coolquitt, and Jeff Williams, three of the highest-profile artists living in Austin brought together for an exhibit organized by Colin Doyle. The works jibe well, Coolquitt and Williams creating unlikely

assemblages that slam together a strong sense of play with the harsh weight of utilitarian materials, and Brauntuch debuting a series of ominous wall-based works that first read as black surfaces but then give way to very realistic but barely discernible imagery.

"Yeah, Brauntuch has done some incredible work with these," Hursh adds, "the most ambitious of which is here in the main space, but what I really want to show you is how the back space is put together - what Lora Reynolds calls the 'Project Room.'"

Hursh is ending his first year as executive director of Art Alliance Austin, a longtime coalition of arts supporters retooled under his leadership to help grow Austin's visual-art scene. Hursh has done admirable work in a short time: increasing AAA membership tenfold, launching Austin Art Weekly (an online source for arts exhibitions and events), hosting monthly Art Breaks to let the public converse with local artists and curators in their spaces, and bringing local contemporary galleries into Art City Austin for the first time in the art fair's history. He credits most of that success to a recharged entrepreneurial attitude and to keeping up with where the local scene is headed.

"I'm most interested in the Project Room because of the way it encapsulates the show," Hursh says, "and because it demonstrates a very pure, distilled curation; there's one work from each artist, and the way these relate to one another define an intended dialogue - a dialogue that's been invisibly moderated by the curator."

We move into the room behind the reception desk, a small space with one wall occupied by a work station and a tall bookshelf full of art anthologies, catalogs, and artist's books. It's usually reserved for smaller projects and shows, but here it serves as a continuation of the work in the main space.

From the doorway, I spy a quiet work by Coolquitt, a pale square of soft cream and off-white fabrics in horizontal strips contained neatly in a white frame. As I step past the threshold, however, my attention is quickly stolen by a large roll of metal standing on its edge, canlike, but pinched around the middle by a huge steel vise. This work by Williams is set closer to another piece of Brauntuch's: a somber object/painting/drawing depicting a scarf mapping out the contours of a figure's face and head.

"Can you see this one?" asks Hursh.

"Yes, that's much more evident."

"Troy Brauntuch's works read somewhere between monochrome painting and photography," he explains. "This dichotomy is interesting because critics and art historians have described monochrome paintings as 'pure painting' and photography is sort of the opposite, having a history of subverting or replacing painting. But these works are neither - they're objects more than images. It's hard, if not impossible, to discern how they're constructed or what the materials are. The objects are beautiful. They're ambiguous but incredibly detailed."

I follow Hursh's pivot to the large roll of metal, the threaded rods and square tube stock of the crushing apparatus unchanged from the material found at Home Depot or the local welding supply store.

"Jeff Williams is emphasizing the materiality of his media," says Hursh. "In this case, taking it right to the edge of destruction. Even though the work is in a small interior space, only four feet high, it takes on a monumental quality. Williams is demonstrating the massive force, power, and construction of these materials. It's a piece that viewers could feel as though they grasp quickly, but after the careful viewing required by Brauntuch's work, it's natural to offer the same thorough observation to Williams' piece. It seems that there is an interest in entropy here and a nod to famous land artist Robert Smithson, but whereas Smithson would take materials just past a break point, Williams is taking materials to their limits without fully breaking them, or he's accelerating entropy through fire, erosion, or chemical peels, without letting that entropy completely render down its subject."

I glance back into the main space at Williams' *Cibolo Creek*, a small construction rigging a blowtorch's business end toward a fossil, in essence staging a physical time-lapse of geothermal decomposition.

"Those concepts are interesting enough on their own," Hursh says, "but we give much more attention to Williams' physical aesthetic and detail because of the Brauntuch nearby. In return, the drama and weight of the Williams lends gravitas to the other works; in them we search for greater meaning than we may have [on their own]. Coolquitt benefits from that but adds a more upbeat playfulness to the group and, most importantly, levity. Colin, Lora, and the team have done a great job selecting works of Coolquitt's to highlight that strength - predominantly suspended lamplike sculptures and lush textiles."

We move back to Coolquitt's inviting white work titled *it's the least i could do*. Maybe I'm just a slave to suggestion, but looking at it invokes an infantile sleepiness.

"He's the most mercurial of the group," Hursh says. "In his solo exhibitions, he at times intentionally overloads the viewer with objects and information, but this selection of Coolquitt's work is a little quieter, calmer, and it allows the viewer to pause and think a little more deeply about each work instead of trying to digest a large quantity. On first glance, what we're really drawn to is the materiality: soft, textured fabric strips on canvas. It's the opposite of Williams' hard, heavy steel and returns to a framed object on a wall that is referencing painting but is really more object than image, hopefully moving us, as the viewer, in relative full circle back to Brauntuch."

Once pointed out, I can feel Coolquitt's levity, Williams' gravity, and Brauntuch's tempo affecting how I see the work. I suspect that Hursh brought me here for this gestalt effect, but also because the space is working with aesthetics common to Austin, just in an uncommon way. I've seen these themes before in the city - DIY materiality, dark elusiveness, post-punk irony, the signs of violent action - but that sort of grit rarely makes its way into Lora Reynolds' pristine space. (Tom Sachs doesn't count.) Here, simplicity and precision guide curation. The works are framed by the cleanliness of the space in a way rarely replicated in the city outside a museum, and the breathing room between works is a refreshing change of pace. It's not the only recipe for success, but it is a welcome one.

"But then there's this," Hursh says, one arm crossed and the other out with palm up, pointing out six metal tubes of varying lengths under two feet leaning against the wall, three Pepto-Bismol pink, three brass. They look as if they could be scrap from Coolquitt's *Alice* series suspended over the front desk, and in the project space, they fit just as well with the other utilitarian objects - computer, chair, bookshelf - as with the other artworks. These metal tubes break away from the cohesion and polish of the rest of the room and exist in a liminal state between art and something rougher, less refined, but maybe more real.

"Confusing, right? Here's another side of curation," Hursh says, handing me a title sheet and one-page exhibition text. "This was written by the assistant director, Colin Doyle, in collaboration with the artists." That text gives background and loose conceptual frameworks for each artist. Closing out the section on Coolquitt:

"It can be difficult to tell whether Coolquitt's objects are *somebody-mades* (curiously modified things he finds as-is on the street), *finished works* (in which the hand of the artist is evident), or *in-betweens* (objects that may have the potential to be incorporated into a finished work). This ambiguity of origin collapses the distinction between art and life, highlighting Coolquitt's ultimate goal of honoring existing communities while building new ones."

I stare back at the *in-between* at our feet.

"It almost feels like Coolquitt snuck this unfinished piece into an otherwise very polished exhibition," says Hursh. "His name isn't next to it on the title sheet, it feels like he couldn't help himself, and the other work, especially in this room, is too clean by comparison. The *in-betweens* and *somebody-mades* act as a counterpoint to that framed and completed quality; they're interesting because we're not sure why they're here or how they fit into the curation. They're an outlier, and it's unclear where they're going. It's unclear for Coolquitt, too. He's selected the objects and arranged them in the gallery space. But even he's not calling it a finished work. Nonetheless, he is saying it's worth looking at, worth thinking about.

"Earlier, you asked me to describe curation in Austin in broad strokes and the state of the scene. You could say we necessitate the inclusion of the *in-between*. We rebel against commonly held protocols of success. That's not all of Austin's identity, but it is a cherished part of it. In Coolquitt's *in-betweens*, there's a countercultural rebellion that subverts and defines the curation of the rest of the space.

"Like the *in-between*, Austin is on display in the midst of our development, before we're a finished product or even sure where we're headed. We're still this shapeless network of artists, art spaces, and events. This unfinished nature is drawing interest and curiosity because people want to get in on the ground floor. The scene is less established than an L.A. or a New York, but the rigidity of those scenes can be frustrating for creatives looking for increased agency.

"When Austin's art scene develops into something more reflective of the young, cultured, fast-growing metropolitan city that we all claim it to be, I hope that we'll be seeing more shows like this: engaging work by artists who call Austin home but have international recognition, curated in a thoughtful way, in a gallery willing and able to participate in the global contemporary art conversation."