

Dystopian Landscapes

Deborah Colton Gallery

Robert Pruitt

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The chasm between the two is made evident by the first work encountered, which you almost stumble over. Alex De Leon's *Welcome Home* looks like a hobbit-sized shantytown. De Leon created a small village made of cardboard signs purchased from homeless people. (The artist paid three dollars for each sign—a point I was reminded of repeatedly while viewing the work.) This piece is installed near big windows, with a view of Houston's metal and glass skyline. It's a nice juxtaposition. Houston's masses of metal and glass reflect the ideals of industry and capitalism. I wondered if one of these buildings housed a cardboard manufacturer.

This left me pondering...if tall, shiny buildings are icons of a utopian society but the products created by those inside such buildings become icons of a dystopian society, then how does industry progress us towards a utopian world? Of course, the answer to this is all a shell game run on us by the shiny-building folks, Enron being the shiniest of examples; their employees may very well be the authors of these cardboard signs. I hope they invest their three dollars well.

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up cans, washing the sidewalk and making some beautiful loop-d-loops with water from a hose. I liked the distance she tried to maintain and found the work to be a great exercise in *less is more*. Of all the works in the show, however, this is the only piece with an image of a person was a little bothered that in a show about the bleak side of society, a black figure is the lone human presence.

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Sound and video installation; edition of three
Dimensions variable

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Hair Balls:
No deal —
negotiations fall
apart between
troubled UTMB and
the city's jails

BY RICHARD

Art



Art Lite

At two new shows, it's half the substance, all the style

BY KELLY KLAASMEYER

Deborah Colton Gallery is located in the David Adickes compound on Summer Street, whose parking lot — which is filled with gargantuan sculptures of presidents' heads — is itself worth a trip. Martin Van Buren stares zombielike into the distance; George H.W. Bush sits revoltingly high on a pedestal. I parked in front of Dwight D. Eisenhower.

A rickety fire-escape-style exterior staircase leads to Colton's gallery, but an even better route is through the warehouse space downstairs — it's filled with the enormous fiberglass molds used for the presidential heads. A stack of giant presidents' ears is nicely surreal, plus the interior stairs are decidedly less precarious.

Colton opened her gallery in the 3,000-square-foot space just over a year ago and has been presenting some sprawling and unwieldy but often interesting shows. The current exhibitions, "JonMarc Edwards: Virtual Urge" and "Dystopian Landscapes," are less satisfying. Both are, with some exceptions, afflicted with a bad case of the style over substance. They're rife with slick work that somehow misses the mark.

JonMarc Edwards's exhibition opens with a stack of instructions for reading his work. I hate instructions, and I don't want to have to read them to look at art. But to be fair, you don't necessarily need them to figure out his work. Edwards uses a system of his own design to layer the letters from words or syllables into graphic symbols. Varying their sizes, he stacks hard-edged letter forms on top of each other to create symbols that look vaguely Asian, or like some obsessed Trekkie's vision of the Vulcan alphabet. The idea and the forms he comes up with are intriguing, and there's a certain level of satisfaction when your brain clicks with his system and a pile of marks reveals itself as a word like "YES," "NO" or "TEXT."

Technology and human emotions are listed as disparate inspirations for Edwards's work, and he has named one of his paintings after Alan Turing, an early leading light of computer science. But whatever Edwards's influences, the central problem with his work is that he hasn't figured out what to do with

the symbols he creates, which are usually cut out of museum board and presented almost exclusively in grid patterns in paintings. Like a teenager at the mall, he tries out different looks for the symbols with varying degrees of success — the works are a jumble of crisp minimalism, expressive paint smears, affectedly arty paint drippings, graffiti-inspired designs and pop images.

The black-and-white *Black Blanc* (2005) models a minimal look. *Alan Turing* (2005), on the other hand, sports drips of red and green paint over "YES" and "NO" symbols. *Urge* (2005) tries on pop-culture references, with letter symbols for "URGE" cut out of borderline soft-core anime images of women. *Yes-no-No-Yes* (2005) has sparse

smears of color on six canvas panels that run for more than 20 feet for no apparent reason other than to make it seem important. Edwards has also thrown in a \$30,000 sculpture — *Virtual Urge file box installation* (2005) — which uses stacks of clear Lucite and fluorescent orange-and-green file boxes (I smell the Container Store) to hold a couple of small stacks of letter forms. It reeks of someone trying to make something that looks cool with not much thought behind it.

Almost all the works were done in 2005 — Edwards is really cranking out the art. It's great to do a lot of experimenting, but there is something called editing. His symbols are

interesting both visually and as an idea, but rather than just focusing on the conceptual and graphic potential of his system, Edwards is frantically grasping for a style.

"Dystopian Landscapes," curated by Jennifer Jankauskas, has its own issues. The title sets up what could be an interesting premise for the exhibition — an essentially anti-utopian take on the screwed-up world around us — but the works she has chosen fail to deliver.

For her untitled 2005 video, Luz Maria Sánchez surreptitiously filmed an elderly black homeless man and his cart of crap. Several different video clips depict him neatly packing the cart and tidying up his area. Shown wall-size with a viewing bench, the work is exploitative and voyeuristic. What is the point — wow, homeless people can be neat and tidy? Is this what fascinated the artist? Are we supposed to marvel that this person has any self-respect?

Another homeless-themed work is *Welcome Home* (2004) by Alex de Leon, who has collected signs from homeless people and used them to construct houses. The purposefully crude homes are crafted from brown-cardboard-and-marker signs that ask for work and money and invoke God. I don't have a problem with the way the houses are built, but the signs are really enough in themselves. Making stuff out of them is over-the-top. Some signs are scrawled; some are carefully lettered with serifs added. They are

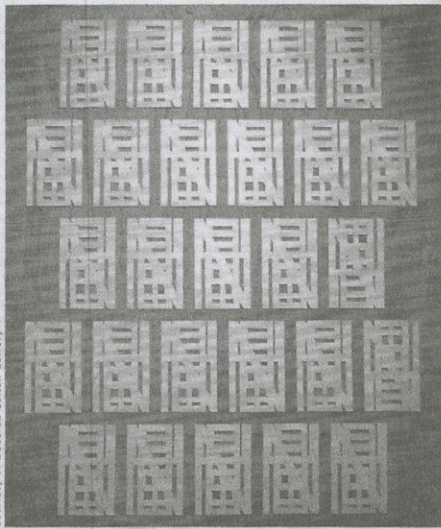
records of individuals and their desperation and their real or scripted plights. Displaying them as they are would have been sufficient.

Dealing with the natural landscape, Anne Wallace's awkwardly titled *Love song to a river when water is the new oil* (2005) uses video that peers into an old oil well and aerial shots of a river projected onto the floor. In the center is a silver platter with salt. At each corner of the projection is a dish of tar "taken from an abandoned well" sitting on a doily. I like how the mound of salt changes the projection, but what all the freaking doilies and silver serving plates have to do with anything is beyond me. Again, another artist is taking what could have been an interesting and straightforwardly executed idea and gummed it up.

Charles LaBelle and Jose Dávila photograph the urban landscape. LaBelle's "compound photographs" use hundreds of tiny images of street debris, statuary, signs, architecture and other fragments of city life pasted into massive grids. They might be better suited to a book or magazine project, but it's not a bad idea. Meanwhile, Dávila's large-scale photographs of urban decay and destruction seem to rely on size to prop up their subject matter; still, they aren't tragically flawed.

The works in both "JonMarc Edwards: Virtual Urge" and "Dystopian Landscapes" are extremely well executed. Even the most conceptually disastrous of Edwards's paintings are beautifully crafted, and the most lamentable videos in "Dystopian" are grandiosely projected. If art were solely about presentation, these artists wouldn't have a problem. Suddenly the goofy presidents'

**"JonMarc Edwards:
Virtual Urge" and
"Dystopian Landscapes"**
Through July 2 at Deborah Colton
Gallery, 2500 Summer Street,
713-864-2364.



In works such as *Yes-No Composite* (2005), JonMarc Edwards's symbols look vaguely Asian, or like a Trekkie's vision of the Vulcan alphabet

Courtesy of Deborah Colton Gallery

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