



TERESA O'CONNOR HOUSTON

Theresa O'Connor's installation *A Ghost Story, Part 1* [Deborah Colton Gallery; July 8–August 31, 2006] combines a confrontational approach, inventive background stories, and outsider characterizations that would be at home in a Terry Allen song cycle. The first installment of a projected triptych, the sprawling installation juxtaposes sculptural tableaux fashioned from found and fabricated objects with a multitude of competing video image streams. Knitted into this framework, O'Connor's characters find themselves cut off from the clarity of linear narrative structure. Her *mise en scènes* present a visual and aural characterization of a landscape, with objects and images serving as landmarks, evidence of inhabitation, and provocative ambiance.

Twelve small photographs function as O'Connor's preamble. Like postcards from the front, they convey atmosphere and imply action. They also foreshadow events, in the manner of a plotless storyboard. In the brightly lit first gallery, the artist introduces her protagonists—The Lounge Act and The Forty Something Male Singer. These fictional characters serve as repositories for a host of mannerisms observed from life. And, as their names suggest, both performers exist on society's margins. O'Connor assumes both roles to surprising effect, disseminating her characterized presence on small video players placed throughout the room. Set on the worn love seat that is the central element of *The Lounge Act (About Her)*, 2005–2006, a book-sized DVD-player provides glimpses of the actress at her makeup table, injecting sound, motion, and messiness into the sculptural ensemble's carefully orchestrated details.

In the darkened second gallery, an arrangement of monitors and sculptural assemblages further suggests the terrain these characters inhabit. A projected landscape sets the stage. Its enlarged detail almost challenges recognition. On the floor, two rotating fans swing

back and forth, conducting a less than Socratic discourse across the pages of Elia Kazan's *The Understudy*, their breezy passages ruffling the pages, tugging them back and forth while leaving the book open more or less in the middle. Kazan's novel concretizes O'Connor's assertion that actors, scenarios, and object tableaux, as "stand-ins for the real, can potentially elicit a more real response from the viewer by being virtual or artificial than by being actual." Opposite *The Understudy*, 2006, is *The Forty Something Male Singer (About Him)*, 2006, a table and chair ensemble whose carefully arranged clues invoke a detective novel crime scene. Flanking it on both sides are wall or floor mounted videos that simultaneously confirm and contradict the evidence piled on the nearby table. *A Ghost Story's* characters exist mostly as ephemeral phantoms, glimpsed obliquely as they carom off across a cacophony of chattering video monitors. Contradicting this nebulous present tense, individual objects seen in the videos are displayed in a vitrine in *Personal History*, 2005–2006, as if they were relics from an archeological dig.

O'Connor disperses clues that, read as cross-references, weave a complex, compelling whole out of numerous fragments. Throughout *A Ghost Story, Part 1*, her use of language is regenerative and context-based. As linked characters pass like ships in the night, O'Connor challenges the sanctity of individualism by showing its illusoriness. The work asserts that identity derives not from autonomy but from context, because the terrain we inhabit is equal parts experience and shared memory. In this sense O'Connor's installation is perhaps closest in spirit to Agnes Martin's abstract paintings. Both provide an abundance of finely honed details, distilling a visceral sense of place out of a landscape that is very much a mental state.

—Christopher French

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Teresa O'Connor, installation view of *A Ghost Story, Part 1* at Deborah Colton Gallery; *The Understudy*, 2006, and view of *Personal History*, 2006, video loop, found and made character belongings, variable dimensions [courtesy of the artist]



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Twin Peaks

Two shows at Deborah Colton Gallery explore ambiguity and the unknown

By Troy Schulze

published: August 17, 2006

A work of visual art naturally possesses a mystery. Most likely, you weren't there when the artist created it, and depending on the artist, the work offers more or less information about the influence and impetus behind it. For some artists, mystery isn't merely a trapping; it's the entire point. Two shows at Deborah Colton Gallery,

"Daniel Kayne: Urban-Mix" and **"Teresa**

O'Connor: A Ghost Story, Part 1," exhibit work by Houston artists for whom ambiguity and the



unknown are obvious obsessions. Walking in, one is immediately struck by Daniel Kayne's large mixed-media prints, some of which resemble the cover art for New Order's *Brotherhood* album. The up-close, grainy photos of scraped and textured metal begin to take on meaning when juxtaposed with Kayne's postcard-size snapshots of graffiti art in Houston, New York and abroad. Two entire walls of prints make up Kayne's document to the unknown artist, and it's the display that makes this collection of images impressive; on their own, they'd make interesting, artsy postcards -- or trading cards. (Right! Graffiti Artist Cards! "I'll trade you a Give Up for a Banksy.")

Courtesy of Deborah Colton Gallery



Has anything "happened" between The Forty Something Male Singer and The Lounge Act?

Where:

Deborah Colton Gallery, 2500
Summer, 713-864-2364.

Details:

Through August 31.

Subject(s):

["Daniel Kayne: Urban-Mix"](#), ["Teresa O'Connor: A Ghost Story, Part 1"](#)

Seriously, though, Kayne is an artist to watch. "Urban-Mix" reveals his keen eye for documenting urban nature, especially things that become part of the city landscape while nobody is watching. To notice these details and wonder about how they got there, Kayne seems to be saying, is to follow a ghost, to peer into an unknown world that can be revealed only by the ghost itself, and that revelation isn't likely.

The conceit gets literal, moody and dark in Teresa O'Connor's unsettling show "A Ghost Story, Part 1." While installations sometimes represent environments that have seen trauma or that create the presence of human characters through strewn clothing, furniture tossed at odd angles and letters left behind, O'Connor has gone beyond that. Through video stations

throughout the two rooms utilized by O'Connor, we're introduced to the characters: a woman called The Lounge Act and a man referred to as The Forty Something Male Singer. We're led to believe these two are in a relationship, though we're supposed to plug in the details. But then again, maybe they haven't even met yet. O'Connor's meticulous placing of vintage furniture, clothing, bric-a-brac and up-to-date technology doesn't naturally suggest that anything has necessarily "happened."

O'Connor drives this home in a brilliant move. A hardcover edition of Elia Kazan's *The Understudy* lies open on the floor, flanked by two vintage Westinghouse oscillating fans, which blow the pages of the book back and forth. Reading the words is essentially impossible. The eye catches snippets of dialogue: "I would have puked but I saw Oscar drawing a pistol out of a holster"; "I'd like to taste a Bonne Nouvelle"; "I felt the nausea again." It's easy to abandon the task of reading, and O'Connor seems to be emphasizing that very thing. Abandon all hope of understanding. Time flows both forward and backward here. Who knows, this place could be the control room where some nefarious being decides and adjusts the fates of unsuspecting men and women. At any moment, a character from an alternate reality may spontaneously materialize in the space.

There are wonderful touches everywhere. At one particular video station, a portable DVD player has been mounted on the wall at exactly the position where the gallery's natural light casts the viewer's shadow, framing the tiny screen inside the viewer's torso. A glass and a coffee cup contain sticky residues of the liquids they once held. Abstract video of a crow repeats on screens throughout the space. A pink heart-shaped tray containing what look like half-eaten chocolates lies next to an ashtray choked with gold-tipped butts. A wall-mounted flat-screen TV displays photographs of the couple in question.

An eerie tone fills the room, too, like an insistent droning, which is both repellent and oddly narcotic - like a David Lynch film. In fact, experiencing O'Connor's bizarre realm must be what it's like to be in a Lynch movie, not as a performer or a crew member, but actually in the movie. She seems to pay homage to Lynch in a video loop of people dancing, or lightly swaying, to an unheard rhythm. O'Connor evokes the mystery, humor and terror of Lynch's work in the unpredictability of her choices.

Then again, "A Ghost Story, Part 1" is an art installation, filled with video loops and electronic gadgets that repeat their patterns all day long. It gets turned on in the morning and turned off at night. If one really took the time to let this piece work on him, the symbols would start to click, and the story would come together, the whole non-narrative. Thankfully, O'Connor's smart. She designed the piece to prevent anyone from ever finding out the truth. One thing's for sure, though: After spending less than a half-hour in O'Connor's weird world, *Mulholland Drive* makes perfect sense.