



DEBORAH COLTON GALLERY

TRAFFIC STOPPER: *Imagine Peace* by Yoko Ono will be on view at the intersection of I-45 and I-10 through Oct. 20. The billboard is part of the show *Word* at Deborah Colton Gallery.

Imagine Peace

Billboard
by Yoko Ono

I contacted Yoko Ono through L. Brandon Krall, the curator of *Word*, the show currently at my gallery. The show is about the power of language to make meaning.

"Brandon and I have worked together for about six years and she suggested Yoko's art. The billboard is a piece Yoko Ono created in New York City after 9/11.

"We worked with CBS Outdoor to get just the right place for it because we wanted it in a high-traffic area. We were able to rent a commercial billboard on I-45 and I-10 East going into downtown Houston, so it works with the beauty of the downtown skyline. It's 14 feet by 48 feet, so it'll be visible to thousands of commuters every day through Oct. 20.

"*Imagine Peace* speaks on so many levels: peace in your own being, peace in your relationships or global peace. It also comes back to John Lennon's song *Imagine*. It's simple but powerful. It's not confrontational, but it's about promoting change.

"I sponsored the billboard myself because it was something I absolutely had to do. Through my gallery I'm trying to help create a better world through art. I'm a mother: I have a 21-year-old and a 13-year-old. I want the next generation to have a better world."

— GALLERY OWNER DEBORAH COLTON, as told to Susan Ruchman

WORD

Through Nov. 4, 2006
Tuesday-Saturday 10:30
a.m. to 5 p.m.
Deborah Colton Gallery
2500 Summer St., 3rd floor
713-864-2364
deborahcoltongallery.com

WORD

Deborah Colton Gallery

Jeff Ward

Two installations situated side by side at Deborah Colton Gallery summarize the central neurosis of the group exhibition *WORD*. The first is an arrangement of glossy flyers, hastily designed pictures of babies, birds and Microsoft CEO Bill Gates with text touting the book *Making Dying Legal* by Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline H. Gins; adjacent, the second installation is composed of artist Gary Sweeney's signage materials. Arakawa, an architect and Gins, a poet, want you to access their ideas for utopian urban planning, which are largely theoretical and unrealized. Their advertisements/protest posters strewn lazily across the wall seem like afterthoughts whose materiality is not intended to be engaged with too intensely. The Sweeney installation, on the other hand—a ransom note of found objects that spell out *Art Must Take Reality by Surprise*, a quotation attributed to author Francois Sagan—beckons us to read into the individuated history of each element.

The use of text in (or as) artwork, particularly how it was employed by Fluxus and early conceptual artists included in this exhibition, forefronts, as Lucy Lippard wrote in the 1968 article *The Dematerialization of Art*, "the idea that art can be experienced in order to extract an idea or underlying intellectual scheme as well as to perceive its formal structure...[which might precipitate] writers becoming more like artists and artists becoming like writers." The confusing range of operations a viewer undertakes with *WORD* replicates how text-based strategies contribute to a contested sense of how contemporary artwork functions.

A number of *WORD*'s works, like Philippe Maucotel's freestanding metal script *thing*, use text to critique a particular medium. What is sculpture? It's a thing, and this one's cheeky, too. Ben Vautier's *black is a word* and *red is a color* from 1975, however, perform similar operations more problematically and interestingly. Both of Vautier's titles are spelled out in paint. Soupy cursive on warped canvas board bow away from the wall, highlighting the ultimate objecthood of painting, as does Maucotel. By highlighting the materiality of sculpture while assigning words a meaning and color, Maucotel underscores the philosophically arbitrary but socially potent variance among words and their various meanings.

A preponderance of works, though, combine materials and text more obliquely to add a poetic



Gary Sweeney, *Art Must Take Reality by Surprise*, 2002
Assorted signage
93 x 173 inches

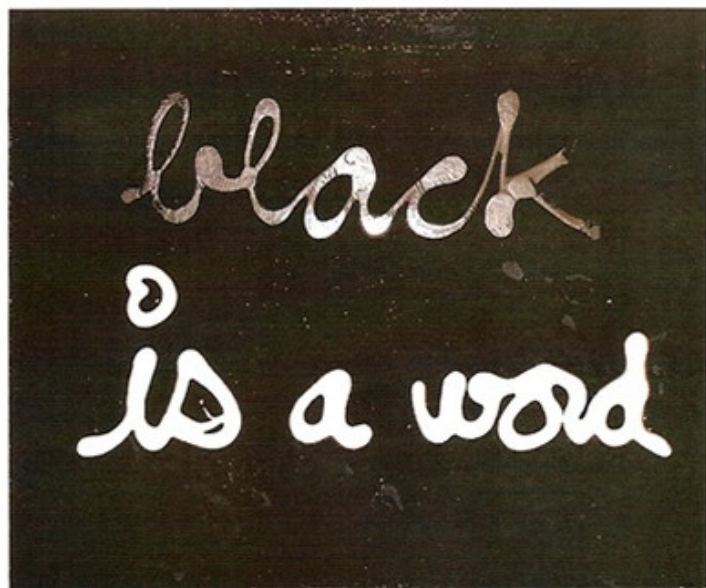
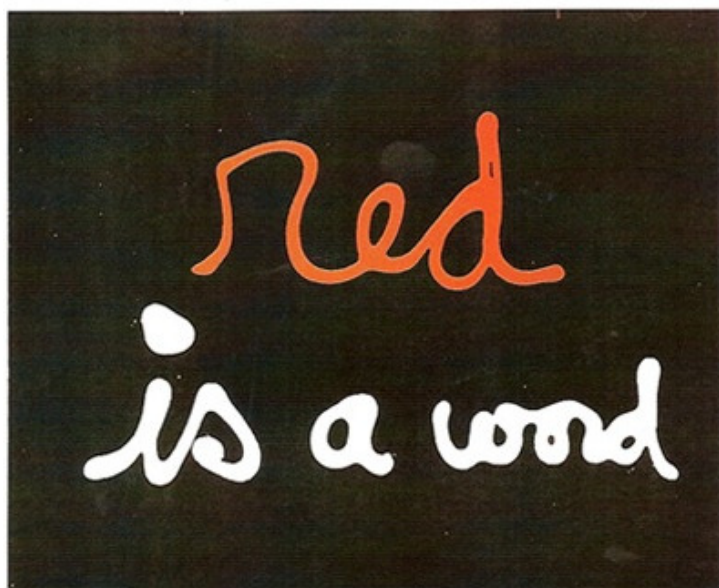


Lawrence Weiner, *Along Down the Line a Bit*, 1999
Vinyl type on drywall
Dimensions variable

opening up of meaning for their materials. The Art Guys' wooden rafters span the corners of rooms like bracing beams, carrying messages like *This is No Laughing Matter*. A brown highway sign by Allison Wiese instructs us to *Root Hog or Die*. A hair comb by *WORD* curator and artist L. Brandon Krall reads *Excellence is the Subtlest Form of*

Subversion. This strategy is less illuminating on the nature of words but is more or less successful in causing a viewer to muse at length about the meaning of a particular object.

Other strategies are less successful. *8 Good and 8 Evils*, also by Krall, falls flat by using text to bluntly brand a particular meaning onto materi-



LEFT: Ben Vautier, *Red is a Word*, 1975
Acrylic on canvas board
20 x 24 inches

RIGHT: Ben Vautier, *Black is a Word*, 1975
Acrylic on canvas board
20 x 24 inches

als. Bamboo mats are benignly labeled "ENERGY - PRAXIS" while "INJUSTICE" is reserved for gold mesh; the moral distinction between these two materials seems even more arbitrary since they are both conjoined to Plexiglas. Wayne Gilbert makes the opposite mistake by taking inconsistent, birdseedlike crematory remains—matter that matters already—and goops them into text paintings. Worst of all, he then sites a series of human and animal names as his materials. Yuck! William Stone is another kind of yuckster, labeling his wooden altarpiece that houses a hamburger roll *The Role of the Church*. Combined with the text strategies that can be read throughout the show, viewing becomes a heady game.

Adding more confusion, the exhibition is littered with a range of non-art objects. Besides the Arakawa/Gins installation/retail display, another section of monographs, books and ephemera are difficult to separate from the number of books displayed behind glass, on pedestals or intentionally out of reach. Celia Alvarez Muñoz' book-art pieces, for instance, are displayed on the wall (as they are designed to be), but a postcard to the curator from

artist James Lee Byars is displayed in a glass dome near a pile of research books, which are meant to be leafed through.

This confusion of texts and information, rather than helping clarify the idea behind the work, highlights how the confusion of roles among artist, writer and curator in the contemporary art world—a condition arrived at in part through the efforts of artists included in *WORD*—can obfuscate the meaning of the art object. Instead of considering the artists' intended meaning, we interrogate the context. Rather than feeling elucidated, we feel suspicious. Is the splay of magazine pullouts designed by blue-chip artists culled from the Rolodex of globe-trotting mega-curator Hans Ulrich Obrist and fashionista/gallerist agnès b. art? Is the dissolution of roles anticipated by Lippard helping artists sculpt ideas, or does it make all artwork solely about apparatuses of power?

None of this confusion should be—or is—inherently verboten. However, some pieces in *WORD* are done a disservice by confusion. For example, Lawrence Weiner's *Along Down the Line a Bit*, one of his famous wall text pieces, gains power by being a contrary strategy to objectmaking. Here, even though it was hung among spare, modern objects, it seemed inert and difficult to evaluate. This work, like the Ed Ruscha print *Pews* or Joseph Kosuth's *Essay #7*, seemed like a placeholder for seminal text-based practices. The best-looking works in *WORD*, therefore, are those that either

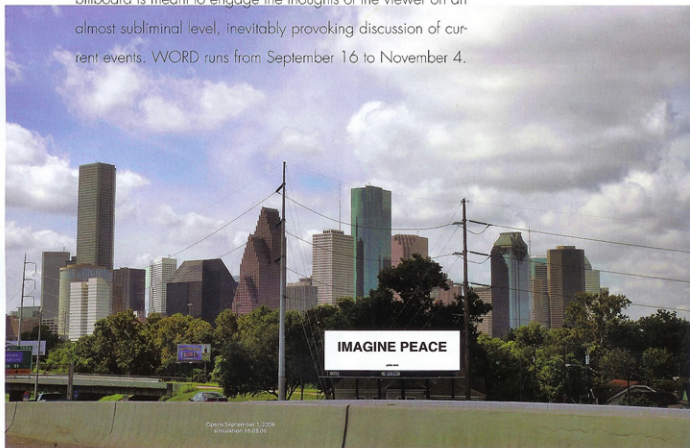
command their context or are sweetly ambivalent to the confusion around them.

For example, Christian Xatrec's *This Sign (Not) for Sale [Autology]*, a double-sided placard that can be arranged to espouse a more or less commercial intention at the whim of the gallerist, is lazily nimble in the confusion dramatized by *WORD*. Jenny Holzer's *Little Blue Corner* works here because the babbling stream of text that tripped across the LED screen was less self-assured than the truisms for which she is known. Lippard and Jerry Kearns' *Happy New Year* essays—originally published in *The Village Voice* between 1981 and 1985 and reproduced as a set of lithographs this year—exhibit a thoughtful shift of context. The look of oxidized paper is captured while the technique exhibits a preparedness to meet the viewer in the gallery.

Yoko Ono's message *Imagine Piece*, however, works precisely because it is not in the gallery. Its highway location and stark black text on the white billboard works especially well for Ono's post 9/11 message, as it references Ono's most well-known artworks (even if they are not always remembered as art) with her late husband. An untitled Robert Barry index card, however, sums up *WORD* best. Manually typewritten in 1970, its fading letters intone what any art object must feel of itself: "SOMETHING WHICH CAN NEVER BE ANY SPECIFIC THING."

IMAGINE PEACE

The next time you are stuck on I-45 North and I-10 East going into downtown Houston, it'll be hard to miss Yoko Ono's 14' by 48' billboard. The provocative artwork **IMAGINE PEACE** will hopefully move and inspire commuters. The billboard is unveiled in anticipation of the **WORD** exhibition opening at the Deborah Colton Gallery September 14. Yoko Ono produced **IMAGINE PEACE** for New York City in 2001, responding to the September 11 World Trade Center tragedy. Deceptively simple, with its basic black and white palette, the billboard is meant to engage the thoughts of the viewer on an almost subliminal level, inevitably provoking discussion of current events. **WORD** runs from September 16 to November 4.



Photography | Courtesy the Deborah Colton Gallery

Word Up!

DEBORAH COLTON GALLERY EXPLORES TEXTUALITY

BY TRIA WOOD



Yoko Ono's billboard entitled, *Imagine Peace*.

When does a word become a work of art? When it's spoken, sculpted in metal, scrolled on a lightboard, photographed or printed on a billboard? More to the point, is the word itself the artwork, or is art more appropriately located in the thoughts and actions that word generates? Conceptual art is the art of ideas, and so it seems entirely appropriate that a great number of conceptual artworks also deal with words. The upcoming show *WORD*, which opens September 16th at Deborah Colton Gallery, explores the nexus between words and artwork. In this show, curator L. Brandon Krall brings together Conceptualists from the 1960s, French Fluxus artists and contemporary conceptual artists, both local and international, all of whom have used text as the basis for artwork. The wide geographic and temporal scope of this show promises to be an intriguing investigation into the ways conceptual artists have invoked the power of the written word.

Words are fertile ground for artists because they are astoundingly mutable and surprisingly visceral. Words, it can be said, conjure mindsets and shape reality, calling new things into being and revealing hidden relationships between ideas. Because they possess great power to provoke emotions and actions as well as ideas, words are bur-

geoning with possibilities and danger. Further, while they present a veneer of veracity, words have a troublesome tendency to be open to varied interpretations. It's no wonder that so many artists turn to words as a way to engage issues and surprise viewers.

The works in this show are often deceptively simple. While it's easy to put off works such as Christian Xatrec's *EXIST* (1984), a lightbox that closely parodies an "Exit" sign, as merely clever puns, a closer look reveals that the concepts of exits/existence and information/orders are at play in this work, adding intrigue as well as humor. Other pieces in the show use words in different ways; Jenny Holzer's *Little Blue Corner* (2003) is an LED sign that scrolls a stream of poetry, while artist Mickey Smith photographs the spines of books and periodicals *in situ* at libraries and book depositories. The former approximates a stream-of-consciousness experience of language as a temporal entity as one waits for each word to be revealed, while the latter depends on a more static sense of found poetry and color for its impact.

WORD will also extend outside the gallery and into the streets of Houston. On September 1st, the show will be preceded in a more public venue in the form of Yoko Ono's *IMAGINE PEACE*, which will be installed on a commercial billboard on I-45

near I-10, with downtown Houston's skyline in the background. This work "will be seen by thousands of commuters everyday, bringing an unexpected art experience to the daily commercial environment," says Colton. Ono created this billboard in 2001 for display in New York as a response to the September 11th attacks. At a time when many were calling for bloody retaliation, the billboard was a simple, quiet voice asking us to consider alternatives. As Colton notes, "the billboard engages the thoughts of the viewer on an almost subliminal level, inevitably provoking discussion of current events." Certainly, the ongoing state of war that has emerged since the creation of this work contributes to its resonance. When juxtaposed against the environment of corporate towers and creeping commuter traffic, as well as the natural beauty of the trees and sky that surround it, the exhortation to "imagine peace" becomes even more complicated—challenging as well as inviting. When viewers might feel compelled to ask, did peace become such a surprising—and almost dangerous—notation? Who knew that two words could be so radical? Colton rightfully anticipates a variety of public and private responses to the artwork as it provokes people to consider their reactions and convictions. Whatever form those responses may take, they will become part of the artwork itself.

Art



Text Messages

A Deborah Colton Gallery exhibition plays with words

BY KEITH PLOCEK

In a sense, every work is itself its best description." These words are part of Joseph Kosuth's *Essays #7* (2000), currently on view in Deborah Colton Gallery's "Word" exhibition. Kosuth attributes the quote to Franco-Bulgarian thinker Tzvetan Todorov, and it functions as a semi-ironic description of the artist's own work. In 1965 Kosuth broke ground with *One and Three Photographs*: a photo of a tree, next to a photo of that photo, next to the definition of the word "photograph." It was a cool trick, especially for the '60s. With *Essays #7*, he presents a photograph of a photograph of *One and Three Photographs* — that's five photographs, for those of you who are still counting — framed by quotes from Todorov and a Belgian literary critic named Georges Poulet. (Perhaps his next trick should be a photograph of the definition for "mise en abyme.") This multiple framing makes for heavy stuff, and you can't help but wonder how many more permutations it'll take before the original tree disappears altogether.

The exhibition is full of wordplay, from the self-referential *Black is a word*, a 1975 offering from superstar Ben Vautier, in which "black" is painted in black and the other words in white, to Wayne Gilbert's *The Difference a Day Makes* (2005), in which the local artist has done his trademark goth thing, using real human cremains (i.e. dead people) to construct "9/10" real small and "9/11" super big. Some of the older stuff on view has been imitated in art classes so many times it's tough to feel the bite, but curator L. Brandon Krall has done a good job of keeping the flow going.

Philippe Maucotel's *thing* (1984) is a painted steel sculpture of the word "thing," and it can be difficult to describe without falling into the vortex of deconstruction.

The *thing* is a thing, you see, but it's also a "thing," meaning it's a signifier of something, which just so happens to be some *thing*. It's also the signified, of course, and that's the thing. Ya dig?

Christian Xatrec's works aren't quite so circular in their reasoning. Hanging over the inside of the gallery door, *EXIST* (1984) is a light box jiggered to look like an exit sign, but with an "s" added, urging folks to keep on keeping on. His *This Sign (Not) For Sale [Autology]* (1989–2006) has "this sign for sale" written on a board that, when it's sold, will be turned over to reveal "this sign not for sale." And hanging over the gallery space on a felt banner are the titular words of *To Be And Not To Be* (1991).

The Art Guys were a natural fit for this show, and they offer up four whimsical works from 2006, each a piece of yellow pine with a sentence cut out, such as "This is not what you think" and "This is everything." The phrases are half funny and half philosophical (duh, it's The Art Guys), but I would've rather seen something from the duo's *101 of the World's Greatest Sculpture Proposals*, like what they presented at Art League Houston last year, when various ideas for food were described and diagrammed but, for the most part, never executed. That was a fresher take on language — treating a description of a potential project as an art object — than what's on view at Deborah Colton.

As with many of the works, the title of Gary Sweeney's *Art Must Take Reality by Sur-*

prise (2002) gives you the whole of the text. Sweeney spelled out his message with letters from old roadside signs, taking a realty sign, for example, chopping it in half and adding an "i" to make "reality." This reappropriation of old signage makes for a nice conceptual touch, but ultimately the piece works because, unlike some of the show's offerings, it's visually interesting. Sure, the idea might be the most important thing, but sometimes you just wanna stare.

William Stone's *And tables* (1999) are definitely worth a long look. These two white tables sport two circular fans — which, considering the gallery's spotty a/c system, are an attraction in themselves — and have panels cut out and reattached on rods. As the wind blows, the panels keep flipping over, revealing the words "over" and "and" over and over again. It's a visual pun, much like his *The Role of the Church* (1999), a small wooden church with a dinner roll in the middle.

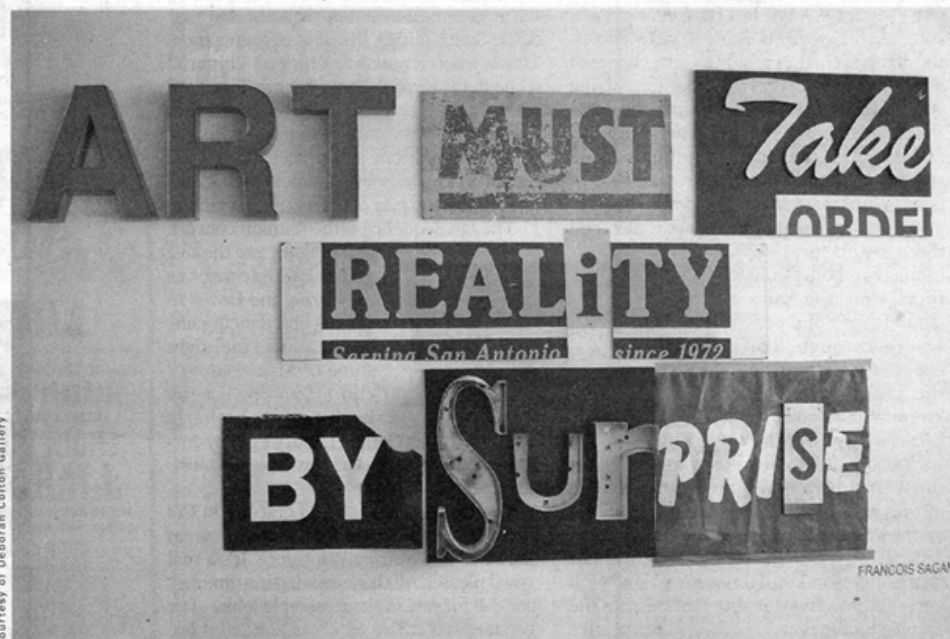
Robert Barry's work can be difficult — for example, when he created unperceivable art by releasing inert gases in the Mojave Desert or when he typed out obscure phrases on index cards, a couple of which are on display here — but his *Carousel* (2005) DVD doesn't require a master's in pomo theory to be enjoyed. The viewer can just sit back and watch as loaded words — "essential," "inevitable," "regret," "confusing" — appear against a black background. Through the letters you can see a still-camera video of a carousel stopping and circling and stopping, accompanied by the sounds of shuffling feet, a whistle, the howling of vendors, a siren. Each word becomes a koan of sorts, an impetus for the viewer to reflect on his or her own feelings upon reading each word.

There are plenty of other interesting pieces in the show, including some by celeb artists such as Yoko Ono and Ed Ruscha, but description can only get us so far. Every work in "Word" draws on common language, which we all share — that's how it works — but words also have private meanings, and ultimately each piece must be experienced on an individual level. Such is perception.

Not to, you know, imply that reading art reviews is a waste of time. ●

"Word"

Through November 4 at Deborah Colton Gallery, 2500 Summer, 713-864-2364.



Unlike some works in the show, this 2002 offering by Gary Sweeney is visually interesting.

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Articles



WORD: Thought Things - L. Brandon Krall



Installation View.

What is the object of art—what is the art object? We might begin by trying to describe the evolution of abstraction in art, or work plus words. Mallarmé and Apollinaire were poets who experimented with graphic elements in revolutionary ways. They were precursors of successive evolutions responding to and advancing the forms that led to contemporary art in the guise of signs in

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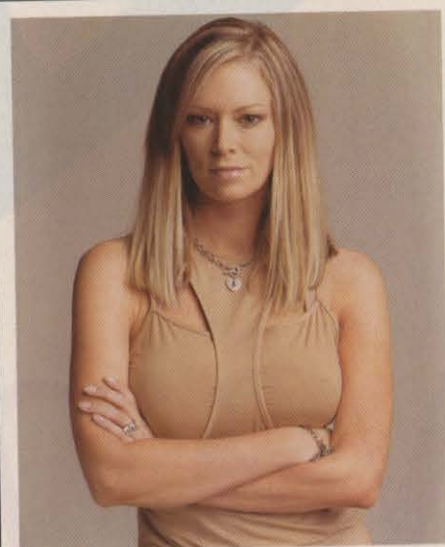
ART NOTES

Art-full autumn! While next month belongs to museums, September is all about the art dealers.

Galactic galleries: First stop, "XXX" at **Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery**, as celebrated lensman **Timothy Greenfield-Sanders** unveils his recent series of, well, porn stars — both naked and clothed — in insightful postmodern portraits (opens September 23) ... **Next** up, **Yoko Ono** in a significant group view, "Word," with heavy hitters **Jenny Holzer**, **Ed Ruscha** and more at **Deborah Colton Gallery** (September 16 – November 4). Don't miss *Imagine Peace*, Ono's billboard on I-45 south towards downtown.

Landscapes: Investigate Utah talent **Bruce Brainard's** exquisite "Land & Sea" at **Gremillion & Co. Fine Art, Inc.** (September 14 – October 16) ... At **Texas Gallery**, the late **Edward James'** ethereal Mexican compound **Las Pozas** is captured by photo luminaries **Sally Mann**, **William Eggleston** and **Rob Ziebell** (opens September 7). **ArtPix's** latest DVD-ROM documents these splendid gardens (\$20; microcinema.com) ... **Susan George's** vistas of earth, ocean and sky at **Harris Gallery** (September 8 – October 7).

Hot Houston artists: Karin **Broker's** new works at **McClain Gallery**; **Sicardi Gallery's** 50-year retrospective for



Timothy Greenfield-Sanders' *Jenna Jameson*, 2004, at Devin Borden Hiram Butler Gallery

Danielle Frankenthal at **Wade Wilson Art** (September 8 – October 21) ... Wine, wine, everywhere as realist master **Thomas Arvid** travels to Houston for a rare personal appearance and exhibition at **Off The Wall Gallery** (Saturday, September 30, 6 – 9 pm).

People: Cavalier Fine Art's **Carl**

Cavalcade ... Top honors at **Houston Center for Contemporary Craft's** "CraftHouston 2006: Texas" to **Susan Budge**, **Ovidio Giberga**, **Edward McCartney** and **William Luft**, with honorable mentions for **Todd Campbell**, **Daryl McCracken** and **Jo Zider** ... Houston painter **John Palmer** debuts in New York at **Coda Gallery** this month, followed by exhibitions in Chicago (October, **Maple Avenue Gallery**) and Dallas (November, **Fairmount Gallery**).

Arrivals: Private dealer, curator and art consultant **Mary Lou Swift** joins Houston's art brigade. Swift, a specialist in 19th- and 20th-century American and au courant contemporary, will divide her time between our town and Southampton, New York ... **Liz Riddle Anders** comes to **Kinzelman Art Consulting** with her newly minted M.A. in Modern Art and Connoisseurship from Christie's and following a recent stint at the auction house's British and Irish art department.

Hurricane: As Katrina's anniversary arrives, two exhibitions address this historic storm: at **The Woodlands** (21 Waterway Avenue), "Katrina and the Waves of Its Diaspora" culls multimedia works by 14 displaced Gulf Coast artists (through

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DEVIN BORDEN HIRAM BUTLER GALLERY

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HOUSTON SEPTEMBER 2006