

Dallas, Oh Dallas!

Do you really want to know why Republicans won big? Ride the Amtrak! I dare you to take the overnight route from Chicago to Texas. Across vast and beautiful midwestern prairies, you will see foreclosure hell, small towns boarded up, decimated by the wretched economy. You will also see monstrous SUVs, carrying nothing, wasting fuel going nowhere. Whatever happened to jobs, green energy and hope?

Then there are the people on the train. The ones who dare speak to you aboard this archaic clunker are like serpents, sniffing every part of your body with their forked tongues. One dude, a disgruntled 50 something Tea Partier -- imagine Henry Fonda desperately trying to score weed -- charmed a couple of skinny-jean hipsters with fantastic stories about his rich brother, a Chicago businessman who tried to kill him once. He talked for hours about his successful career tattooing movie stars, life on parole and his loving wife and daughter. "Got a Mexican and a Filipina woman waiting to service me, free of charge, once I get to Texas," he whispered, laughing perversely. Good thing the dude got off the train in St. Louis.

So, what's in Texas, you might ask? Money, baby, enough to burn. Banking, technology, defense contracting, hospital tourism, oil and the Bush family move the economy. Texas is immense, Houston being the largest city in the state (fourth largest in the United States), followed by Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, El Paso and Austin.

However, it is the combination of Dallas / Fort Worth that really rocks, thanks in part to cultural venues designed to impress. Some of the most notable include I.M. Pei's Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center (catalogued as one of the world's greatest orchestra halls), and the futuristic new Cowboys Stadium, famously packed with site-specific installations by hip contemporary artists.

And get a load of this, one of the largest collections of Spanish art outside Spain is at the Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University, while Euro-chic yBa masterpieces can be found at the recently reopened Goss-Michael Foundation, a project of pop star George Michael and his art-dealer boyfriend, Kenny Goss.

If you fancy astonishing cribs decorated with artworks by Sterling Ruby or Marlene Dumas, then the Rachofski House designed by Richard Meier is the place for you. In addition, the town has its own art fair, the Dallas Art Fair, with its third edition slated for Apr. 8-10, 2011.

In Fort Worth architecture rules with a triumvirate of heavyweights: the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, a beautifully massive concrete cathedral designed by Tadao Ando; Louis Kahn's masterpiece, the Kimbell Art Museum, across the street; and the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, designed by Philip Johnson, just a hop and a jump away.

Let me also give a name-check to the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Artpace in San Antonio and the

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Houston's CORE residency program. Texas is also home base for the magazine Art Lies and the Glasstire art blog.

However, if I had to choose, I would that Dallas' most valuable asset is its people, who seem to be always smiley, attentive and happy. "We're not naïve but we are not going to stab you on the back either," said Nancy Brown, a conceptual painter that was kind enough to drive me through Dallas' crazy suburban sprawl. Obviously, Nancy caught my skepticism and added, "It's easy to earn a living here. Why not be happy?"

Our first stop was at 500x in Expo Park, an artist's co-op that has been around for 32 years. How does it survive? The owner of the building is a photographer and leases the nongallery portion of the lofty space as residential apartments. There I saw We Like the Boom, a cool installation by Matt D. Clark and Kathy Webster that consists of two large floor sculptures resembling molars covered in colorful shiny glitter. Closer inspection reveals Pop art imagery on its shiny, busy surface. A video accompanying the installation shows a person with a leaf blower, setting party decorations into aerial motion, signaling I guess a never-ending celebration or parade.

Another work that caught my attention was Overton Plaza by Nate Glaspie. Here the artist sandwiched galvanized steel, mirrors, cardboard and other hardware together to make six shelving units, a clear homage to Donald Judd. The whole thing goes for \$3,800.

From Expo Park to the condensed gallery district of Deep Ellum is only a short car ride. Once a hub for recording studios and Blues legends like Robert Johnson, Ellum is now a trendy neighborhood boasting hip restaurants. There we visited respected art dealer Barry Whistler, who has been in the same location for 25 years. Whistler exudes cool calm and his newly remodeled space looks juts like any other white cube in Chelsea.

When asked about the economy my host, artist and collector Michael Wynne, interrupted and commented that Whistler has survived many recessions and this one will not be the last. From the look of his crew, busy packing art and working the phones, I believe it.

Titled "Maine," the show on view was by photographer and editorial journalist Allison V. Smith. In large-scale color prints the artist juxtaposes damp landscapes with the muggy interiors of her family's vacation home. The best of the bunch is Westerns. August 2009. Liberty, Maine. It shows a collection of old serial novels photographed in a dark room that hits the right tone between sappy and melancholic. They are nicely priced, too, at \$5,000 a piece, in an edition of three.

My favorite work by Smith, however, was not in the show. It is a portrait of legendary pitcher Nolan Ryan that Smith made for USA Today in 2008.

At Whistler I also got to see "New York City: 1988-89," a series of small and delicate monochrome

watercolors by John Wilcox that deal with poetry, text and the AIDS epidemic -- a solemn subject, to say the least. For example, one with the word "TENDER" provokes multiple associations related to care as well as fragility of human skin. By erasing or adding multiple layers of almost seamless brushwork, Wilcox creates a sensation of depth in each letter, and corrugates the surface of the paper in such a way that it exposes the tranquil fragility of the source material. This is the type of work one has to see in person to feel its emotional value.

Across the street from Whistler is The Public Trust, an alternative space. On view were large paintings by Blakely Dadson, a young artist who pretty much illustrates in glossy resins diamond-encrusted jewelry and statuettes of Christ. For now Dadson makes interesting and good-looking work, but the prices, going as high as \$15,000, struck me as perhaps a bit over the top.

Northwest of downtown, a ten minute drive from Deep Ellum, is the Design District, where a long strip of blue chip galleries and alternative spaces coexist in commercial bliss side by side with crappy decorative housewares outlets. Along the road we saw tacky banners announcing Dallas Contemporary, a new a noncollecting art museum of contemporary art that is off to a big start, in more ways than one. Its obscenely large proportions prove the saying that "Everything's Big in Texas," and the commemorative wall of donors reads like a who's who of Dallas philanthropy and corporate power. Director of the space is globetrotting curator Peter Doroshenko, who comes off a stint working in Kiev for the Ukrainian supercollector there.

The big spaces of Dallas Contemporary was a luxurious commodity for fiber artist Gabriel Dawe, whose installation Plexus 4 was a sort of infinite hallway made out of hundreds of veils of threads, tinted in red and yellow, that seemed to expand into the infinite. The work brings to mind works by the Venezuelan kinetic art genius Jesús Rafael Soto (1923-2005).

Down the road is Holly Johnson Gallery, a serious dealer who has been in Dallas since 2005. Johnson believes that having one street dedicated to art galleries, the Dallas Art Fair commitment to internationalize its product, and the creation of the Contemporary Art Dealers of Dallas group has been key to this new Dallas art renaissance.

I liked her program because many of her artists seem to have obsessive personalities. Take John Adelman, his drawing Fardel is surprisingly flat considering the hours he spent rendering unreadable layers of text, made in Lumicolor ink on board. Johnson explained that any interruptions during the arduous and methodical studio sessions could make the artist anxious to the point where he would not touch it ever again. At \$3,000, Fardel is definitely a bargain.

On the other hand, William Betts may be a voyeur. He uses surveillance footage from the Texas Department of Transportation -- that he has licensed to copy in his paintings -- and replicates the scenes by applying thousands of individual drops of paint. The end product is complex and titillating pixilated

surfaces.

Spicing things up in the Design District is Plush Gallery, run by my good friend Randall Garret. After a three-year hiatus Plush is back, thanks in part to the generosity of Cunningham Architects. The firm has given Garret a spacious and elegant studio located in the heart of the action -- inside their offices. "Gary (Cunningham) used to visit the old Plush in downtown Dallas and he would buy work. . . he has always been very supportive," said Garret, happy, like I said.

Garret waxed extremely enthusiastic about Brandon Behning, a new talent from Santa Fe who has recently gained a degree of local recognition, mostly for his work as part of the Meow Wolf collective. I dug his work too, especially k & d, which is a small and clunky, yet striking monumental floor assemblage, made of ephemeral materials, resembling an arc of triumph or weird archeological finding. Behning's work owes much to Arte Povera, but is its reckless abandon that could be misunderstood by many as outsider art. More surprising is the price, at only \$700.

Another notable art dealer is Cris Worley. She is energetic, sympathetic, insightful and, best of all, in love with her artists. Worley, a former director of the Dallas branch of Pan American Art Projects, candidly explained why she took the risk of opening her own gallery in hard fiscal times. "We haven't been hit as hard here by the economy, plus the art community is coming to the Design District and supporting our efforts." She added, "and when you have nothing to lose, you can take the risk."



At Cris Worley Fine Arts in Dallas, dealer Cris Worley with Isabelle Du Toit's *Blue Jays*

Of her stable we liked French-born Isabelle Du Toit, whose knack for both drama and sarcasm in the painting *Blue Jays* was confusing and thought-provoking. The picture presents a realistic (maybe even Baroque) portrait of two birds; one lies dead at the feet of the other, who looks heroic. At \$7,000, this is another steal.

On our way south, crossing a bridge that runs over a dried up river, overlooking the foundation for an upcoming Santiago Calatrava development and the brilliant Dallas skyline, was the Tyler Davis Art District in the neighborhood of Oak Cliff. "Dallas has torn down many of its old structures, and this is the only place where you can see how Dallas really was," said Steve Cruz, an artist and director of Mighty Fine Arts Gallery. Cruz explained that the community has been able to fight back gentrification and save part of Oak Cliff's architectural integrity, at least for now. Exhibiting in the gallery's project room was Shelly Hampe, who paints groupings of wooden logs in pastel colors. On the top, instead of leaves these

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logs grow weavings and patterns.

Our driver for that night was artist and musician CJ Davis. He used to show with the respected local artist-run gallery And/Or and seems to know pretty much everyone in the art scene. Over dinner at a Salvadorian restaurant we talked about the Dallas scene, and he noted -- as do many outside New York -- that local collectors "only care when a Texas artist is embraced by New York in the Whitney Biennial." When I asked about Jerry Jones' football stadium, both Davis and Cruz laughed out loud. The project, they noted, did little for the local art community, or for local art viewers, since it's too expensive for most people to even go to a game.

- Pedro Vélez