

ART VOICES

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OKAY MOUNTAIN

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SKULL FUCK NEW!
SKULL FUCK ENERGY DRINK
SODIUM FREE



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OKAY MOUNTAIN

BY DAN BOEHL

The night of Friday, December 4th, I was standing in the Austin Museum of Art at the first annual Austin Visual Arts Association Awards. Three of the Okay Mountain (OKMT) collective, Nathan Green, Sterling Allen, and Carlos Rosales-Silva, were nominated in the category of Artist of the Year – Early Career. The OKMT collective weren't attending, as they were in Miami presenting their installation *Corner Store*, which is sponsored by Arthouse at the Jones Center. Just as the Early Career award went to someone else, I got a text message from Rosales-Silva. "We won the Pulse Prize," it read. I texted a congratulations to Allen. "Ha, ha," he wrote back. "We made it from trash!"

The original eight OKMT partners formed to open a gallery in April 2006, gathering talent from seminal but now defunct art collectives. Peat Duggins came from the Fresh Up Club; Allen, Nathan Green, and Ryan Hennessee from Art Studio Studios, and Michael Sieben from Camp Fig, which had ties to Josh Rios and Tim Brown. Justin Goldwater they met while animating "A Scanner Darkly." The OKMT collective are a scrappy and crafty bunch who, practicing professional artists in their own rights, epitomize the Austin art lifestyle. When Green introduced me to Duggins at an opening in 2006, the two discussed how to dial up to the Texas Workforce Commission's unemployment distribution system. Animation on "A Scanner Darkly" had just wrapped, leaving many of the partners out of work, but flush with the start up cash that they zealously dumped into the gallery. Corkey Sinks joined the gallery after interning. Eventually OKMT picked up two more gallery staff, Rosales-Silva, and Jesse Butcher, who participate in the collective projects on an invitational basis.

The OKMT gallery went on to show William Cordova, Kalup Linzy, Laurel Nakadate, Ryan Trecartin, Maya Hayuk, Evah Fan, Paul Slocum, and Basim Magdy, and they've been able to generate modest art sales, but they don't sell enough work to pay the gallery's overhead every month. Austin doesn't have the culture of collecting enjoyed by bigger Texas cities, a symptom of Austin wealth in the emerging tech class rather than the old-money oil barons. There are a lot of flat-screens in the downtown Austin condos, but not a whole lot of art. And many middle class Austinites won't travel to the gallery's Eastside location, in a neighborhood where houses still have bars on the windows. As Rios put it, "We have business concerns, but they are mostly just concerns. We're not good at selling things, but we're good at making them

look like you should buy them."

In lieu of brisk sales, the collective raises operating capital by monetizing their workforce. They've been making 7-by-7 inch drawings since the gallery's inception, one partner drawing on 7-by-7 inch paper and finished by a second partner. Each piece is priced at \$25. The simple process of drawing together grew into a game that taught them each other's styles and strengths. They've translated this knowledge to their larger projects, eventually developing their collaborative language of narrative, planning, and execution when Austin Ventures, a capital investment firm, commissioned them to paint a sprawling multi-room mural in their 22nd floor offices. OKMT developed a "Game of Life" concept with Austin Ventures, and then handed the concept to Goldwater. Goldwater acted as a project manager, gathering specific drawings from the other partners to populate the concept, which follows a business owner from farm to mansion. Painting the mural over the summer of 2008, the collective paid partners \$20 an hour for drawing and design work, and \$15 for painting. All the money left over went back into the gallery.

And it's not exactly true to say *Corner Store* was made from trash. A totally immersive installation, *Corner Store* is modeled after a store on Austin's Eastside, just a few blocks from the Okay Mountain Gallery. To stretch the budget Arthouse gave them, OKMT scavenged most of the store fixtures, including shelving, counters, a soda fountain, and a hotdog cabinet. Then OKMT bought and altered hundreds of real products by redesigning the packaging. There is Get A Baby Drunk bubble bath, Premium Horsemeat in a can, Sneaker bars, and Dookie Saddle Pampers featuring Baby Ikki. Like real life, the OKMT collective poured countless hours into product design, creating something that "looks like you should buy it."

The OKMT collective is so adept at making things that look like you should buy it that Pulse fairgoers thought *Corner Store* was a real store. Many came in searching for water. An Italian gallery owner asked for an espresso. Another tried to buy a hotdog. Sinks told him, "That's a condom filled with water." Like other OKMT endeavors, the sheer size of their outfit allows them to tackle their projects in ways a single working artist with assistants cannot accomplish. The OKMT crew arrived an





hour before Pulse opened for installation on Tuesday and quickly made friends with the security officers, the janitors, and event staff. Sinks tried to park her rental car Thursday afternoon, and a guard told her she needed \$10. But when he saw Allen come out with the \$10 bill he told Sinks, "You are O.K."

The store came complete with an ATM/poker machine, hotdog and soda dispensers, a surveillance system, products cramming the shelves, building facades, and two murals. OKMT set out to replicate the art fair interaction, but with many, many art objects. Fairgoers still walked into a booth and saw an attendant, but instead of a gallerina, they found OKMT collective members talking about the installation and bagging purchases. Priced from \$5 to \$10,000 and including a free product circular, there was something in the store for everyone.

The OKMT collective nearly got kicked out of the PULSE Miami Party because they were wearing shorts. When a bartender told Rosales-Silva that beers cost \$25, they all just drank the free Campari. Later they wandered onto the beach. Rios said, "All the cool people came down." People bought beer and wine from a convenience store. They celebrated. Green and Duggins slept on the beach.

The OKMT collective has received a lot of attention since PULSE, and they had offers for projects during the art fair, but nothing solid materialized. Even so, OKMT has a full schedule. The installation Big Strange Mystery opened at Texas State University on January 21st. A food fight/civil war mural is scheduled for the Vanderbilt University commissary. Other projects are in the pipeline.

