

Okay Mountain makes a big art-world splash

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Okay Mountain's East Austin gallery exhibits works by solo artists from around the world. The 10 members of the collective, which include Nathan Green, Sterling Allen, Michael Sieben, Carlos Rosales-Silva and Ryan Hennessee, have had their works exhibited from Kansas City to Mexico City, San Antonio to New York. The newest, 'Water, Water Everywhere, So Let's All Have a Drink' heads to New Orleans and Illinois soon.

An enormous television made of wood dominates the small back gallery at the Austin Museum of Art. On its larger-than-life screen runs a 28-minute continuous video loop that resembles inveterate channel surfing. Snippets of footage flash by: low-budget infomercials, self-serious history programs, blundering local news reports, didactic educational cartoons, exploitative reality shows.

Titled 'Water, Water Everywhere, So Let's All Have a Drink,' the video installation is by Austin collective **Okay Mountain**. And like the other incessantly elaborate artwork the group creates, it's equal parts handmade and high-tech, campy and endearing. It simultaneously pays an affectionate homage to pop culture and also satirizes our media-saturated zeitgeist.

After its Austin exhibit, "Water, Water" heads to New Orleans' Prospect 1.5, a biennial of international contemporary art, and then to the Bradley University's Heuser Art Center Gallery in Illinois.

The installation's travels represent just the latest in a veritable blitz of national exposure for the group of 10 artists in the past year — the kind of buzz any emerging artist would dream of.

But the Okay Mountain Collective disrupts the conventional notions of what characterizes an artist, scrambling the boundaries between the individual and the group. In Okay Mountain's case, a singular style has emerged from the creative minds of Sterling Allen, Tim Brown, Peat Duggins, Justin Goldwater, Nathan Green, Ryan Hennessee, Josh Rios, Carlos Rosales-Silva, Michael Sieben and Corkey Sinks.

Last month the collective exhibited its installation "Benefit Plate" at New York's trendy Freight and Volume Gallery, picking up positive reviews from the typically temperamental critics of The New York Times and the Village Voice. Vanderbilt University commissioned a mural from the group in February, and in the same month, the collective created a sprawling immersive exhibition at Texas State University. Their projects have been exhibited in Mexico City and Kansas City, Mo., and next year are headed to San Antonio's McNay Art Museum and the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum.

In December, the gang of 10 — who range in age from their late 20s to late 30s — made a huge splash at the Miami art fairs, arguably the contemporary arts world's biggest, buzziest annual gathering in the United States. With a commission from Arthouse, the Austin-based contemporary arts center, the collective made "Corner Store," an ersatz down-market convenience store completely stocked with artist-made versions of cheap products that were actually for sale. "Corner Store" netted the Pulse Miami Prize and the Viewer's Choice Award, burning up the Twitter streams and chatter of the fairs' A-list of collectors and curators. Kentucky hotelier Steve Wilson and his wife, Laura Lee Brown, major contemporary art collectors who opened the edgy, posh 21c Museum Hotel in Louisville largely to showcase their collection, bought "Corner Store" — remarkable given that the installation was only the fourth project the collective produced. (The same collectors have announced preliminary plans to open a hotel in Austin.)

"I think what makes Okay Mountain Collective different from other artist collectives is that we didn't start because we wanted to make art together," says Allen. "The whole reason we are a team is because we were already doing this whole other thing together."

That other thing is not insignificantly Okay Mountain Gallery. One of the first indie galleries to stake out East Austin as an arts destination, it's also one of the East Austin venues that's had the farthest reach, racking up collaborations with the Blanton Museum of Art, coverage in national art journals and exhibits by international artists since opening in 2006.

That's probably because, unlike many artist-run galleries, the Okay group didn't want a place to merely show their own work, but rather the work of other young artists from around the world. (The gallery's current show features the work of Dutch artist Ruth van Beek.) And forget declaring nonprofit status or relying on grants and donations. Okay Mountain is self-funded with members pooling their resources to pay rent and expenses that art sales don't. (Costs run upward of \$3,000 per month.)

"We were never really interested in selling art, we were just interested in showing it and giving new art the nicest setting we could," says Sieben about the gallery's ethos. (The current gallery is actually a reincarnation of Camp Fig Gallery, which was run by Sieben and others in a tiny storefront off Sixth Street and closed in 2005.) "And we're still not great at selling art. But the reward has always been meeting other artists, having conversations, plugging into a network of artists and curators and gallerists from all over. If we were all just alone in our studios, we wouldn't be as tied in to so many other people."

A few months into co-running their gallery, the group decided to do something special during the 2006 East Austin Studio Tour. "We thought that just for the weekend (of the EAST tour), we'd show our own work, but do so with a twist," says Sieben.

Though they have distinctive styles as individual artists, they're all skilled draftsmen and irrepressible illustrators (all are art school graduates). And they threw themselves a drawing challenge with one person starting a drawing and two others finishing it. They produced 90 7-inch-by-7-inch drawings, each a communal creation. And the drawings sold like crazy. (The project is ongoing, with new collaborative drawings added all the time.)

A year later, leaders at the University of Texas' Creative Research Laboratory exhibit space approached the group with a challenge bigger than a drawing dare: Create a gallery-sized installation. With video components, a towering pyramid of beer cans, drawings, paintings and more, "It's Going to Be Everything" marked the first public exhibition of what the artists realized could be a viable experiment in communal art-making.

As soon as they discovered the best way to proceed, that is.

"Working together as a group wasn't necessarily a natural thing for any of us," says Allen. "Even though we may have a lot in common aesthetically, we literally weren't used to being in the same space making art at the same time."

Communal art-making has a lengthy trajectory in modern history, from manifesto-driven creative clusters during the Russian Revolution to 1960s hippie-flavored happenings to guildlike groups of artisans. Still, the logistics of directing a gang of aesthetically minded individuals toward the same ends is not easy.

As they took on more collective projects, the Okay Mountain group saw their weekly meeting morph from discussions of gallery business to creative strategizing sessions. Painstaking planning needed to go hand-in-hand with fun-filled artistic brainstorming. "We spend almost as much time planning how we're going to do something as doing it," says Sieben.

Like jazz musicians riffing on each other's improvisations while always keeping the same beat, so do the Okay Mountain 10 create in constant response to the group. "(The final piece of art) always ends up a mash-up of everyone's ideas," says Green. "Everyone's playing off what's being made while it's being made. We're changing things the whole way through to the end."

And how about arriving at a group aesthetic? "I think the ego clashing is checked at the start because we all have our own artwork to return to," says Sieben. "Your work as an individual feeds the work you do with the collective and vice versa."

(All have busy individual careers of their own. Sieben is a sought-after illustrator. Noted Austin collectors Jeanne and Michael Klein bought several works by Duggins last year and donated them to the Blanton. Allen recently completed a competitive Artpace San Antonio international residence. Hennessee received a commission from Arthouse to create an animated film for its grand reopening next month.)

Maximal might just be the optimal word to characterize the collective's style. All are unapologetic progeny of our pop-culture-saturated, consumer-driven American culture — as celebratory of its absurdities as they are careful and critical observers of those absurdities.

"We're skewering stuff, but not so radically that it's not recognizable," says Sieben. "We're working within the language of the things we're referencing. If you flip through a bunch of television channels, it's just as crazy as our ('Water, Water') installation. We hope it comes across that we're fans of the type of culture we're making art about."

The cooperative creative process has become harder of late as several members have relocated to other cities. Now, ideas are just as likely to be bandied about over beers at the gallery as they are via Google Wave, a Web-based application for real-time image-enhanced communication.

Still, the group is determined to stay together for the foreseeable future. "Keeping it together is important because that's what makes it so exciting," says Allen.

"There are 10 sets of hands, 10 brains, 10 imaginations all making this one thing. Really, I don't think there's nothing else we'd rather be doing."

Source: <http://www.austin360.com/news/entertainment/arts-theater/okay-mountain-makes-a-big-art-world-splash-1/nRxy/>