

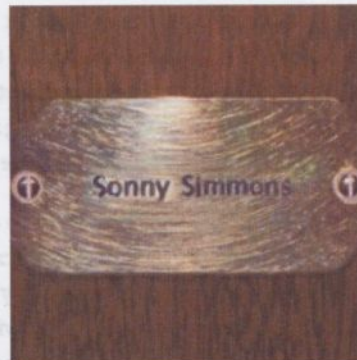


Landscape, catfight, and another musical

FRIDAY, 25 MARCH 2011 03:13 SARAH FISCH REVIEWS

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Kelly Richardson entertained a notion about swamps. E.V. Day had put together two cat skeletons and caged them, and thought of it as a sort of mock-up for a future project. Devon Dikeou's friend Sonny Simmons is a jazzman whom the world nearly forgot. Armed with impressive CVs, and the imprimatur of curator Heather Pesanti of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, their fingers in different media pies – and preoccupied with seemingly disparate obsessions – these three artists arrived for their Artpace residency two months ago amidst institutional drama and a bizarre, unexpected Texas cold spell.



Devon Dikeou,

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Pesanti chose Richardson, Day and Dikeou based on their work, which she'd seen in-person, in photographs, and online. She knew none of the artists personally, and had only ever met one of the three, until today. When presented with the curatorship, Pesanti researched 20 artists seriously, and settled on these three not only for the quality of their existing work, but because she thought the Artpace residency would help their careers the most. Honest to God, this is not a curatorial dictum I've ever heard before in relation to Artpace. Further, Pesanti (gently) insisted the artists actually inhabit Artpace AIR, leave their regular lives and homes behind and come to San Antonio and immerse themselves in person, commit fully, use all the time, all the available resources, the entirety of the opportunity.

The result is a mighty Artpace Artist in Residence show, the best in a very long time.

Start with Kelly Richardson's "Leviathan," a densely enveloping high-definition 3-channel video installation, with sound. You'll be looking at what Richardson was looking at – an extraordinarily detailed vista of marshland, murky water and Spanish Moss-strewn bald cypresses which ring Caddo Lake in the Big Thicket National Preserve. Caddo Lake straddles Texas and Louisiana; landscape and culture-wise, it's the biome of Texas most distinctly of the South, a bayou lair of folkloric memory and fecund creepiness.

When she got here, Richardson towed her partner and their toddler out West, to the Marfa-Big Bend area, and decided that the big "we," viewers in- and outside of Texas, already know that territory. It's the Texas of *Giant* and *There Will Be Blood* and, most recently, of the Coen brothers. Despite the grisliness of some of the films, the terrain retains what Richardson described as "wholesomeness," and felt at odds with her preoccupations, which turn out to be a speculative focus on a highly mediated, post-post apocalyptic "what-if?" landscape.

So she headed for the swamp in winter, where the gray light barely dapples the water, the chill breeze moving the hanging moss like something underwater, too. She jokes that upon reaching the tiny bayou town of Uncertain, Texas and its environs, she said, "We're gonna die out here!"

She filmed the swamp on HD video, and uses a 20-minute loop, so if you're standing there even for a while, you've got a good chance of not seeing the same second twice. Though maybe less obviously than in such earlier works as "At War With the Mystics" (2010) and "Twilight Avenger" (2008), Richardson has modified this already beautiful and frightening penumbra of a place. A yellow-green undercurrent of light moves continually in the water, as though Caddo Lake is irradiated or haunted, maybe. Mists evanesce; she's excised all animal life, aside from one errant momentary heron on the right side of the frame. And she's composed an almost plausible, but increasingly disquieting soundscape, something between a whoosh and a throb that connotes ebb and flow and ... spaceships, maybe?

Richardson, in her presentation at Thursday morning's press event, gave a shout-out to science fiction, the ways in which the speculative description or portrayal of alternate worlds allows you to experience them. But she acknowledged too the primordial ooze factor, the very real sense that what you're looking at is beyond ancient; it's a video snapshot of the Cretaceous. It's *The World Without Us* and the world before us.

Later, she talked about growing up on the edge of Toronto as the suburbs sprawled past her town and into the Canadian landscape, where mysterious old quarries were filled up, housing developments encroaching so fully she can't recognize the land. What a terrible feeling that is for anyone whose country had a wild frontier (she lives in England now, that most cultivated of turfs, not an unknown inch in a thousand years). You can't look at a landscape anymore without feeling incredible guilt, she said.

A work of landscape can be put to so many uses. "Sunday painters" extolling some Alpine Bob Ross fantasy; the utopian vistas of the 18th and 19th centuries, which lured pioneers here to test their conquering mettle in man vs. nature (which, in East Texas as elsewhere, included Indians). "Leviathan" is meant to scare, Richardson admits, and while the foreboding in her piece arises partly from nature itself, the threat has changed course; we have seen the Leviathan, and he is us.

In going from Richardson's room into E.V. Day's, you pass from the Cretaceous to the Cenozoic. You may be familiar with Day's work from her series of explosive photographs taken while in residence in Monet's place in Giverny, or her treatment of New York City Opera costumes, or "Bride Fight," her depiction of female aggression, aspiration and the ritual garments that go with all that. As a thinker, Day visits and re-visits the territory of sex, competition, repression leading to explosion. As in various of her other works, "CatFight" makes generous and dazzling use of monofilament, a trendy material these days; but whereas Cai Guo-Qiang and British artist (and Artpace alum) Cornelia Parker use the stuff to defy gravity, for Day it's a graphic element.

She bristles slightly at the title "sculptor," and explained at the press event that she's a "3-D artist," that she draws in space. Day used roughly twice the amount of monofilament than was needed to hang and anchor her artwork, in order to create a beautiful geometric sectioning-off of the air, and maybe to suggest an ever-tightening net or web.

So, what's she holding up with it?

Saber-tooth tigers! Day has choreographed a battle royale between the cast replica skeletons of two female saber-tooth cats. It's a dazzler, all red in tooth and claw, except she's deftly applied silver leaf to the teeth and claws. One of the cats is lunging at the other, and the sheer number of articulated variables in this battle embrace is a spectacle. Her "point" about female-on-female drama and its place in human culture is well-made, cruelly seductive and potent; these are the Real Housewives of La Brea.

She's also constructed and placed smaller aluminum puzzle-inspired snake sculptures around this suspended moment, each snake an open-mouthed spectator. The gallery notes denote them as masculine, and their tongue-out expressions do well in evoking the titillated male gaze, and while I liked their design, I didn't feel their necessity. The catfight is narrative drama and design virtuosity enough without the extra audience; we should be implicated, the snakes seem like an extra step.

Upstairs, Devon Dikeou's "Mamas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys" at first walk-in seems to be made of disparate elements. One wooden interior wall holds a number of photographs of metal plaques with names on them; in the center of the space is a structure made of cardboard shipping boxes full of giveaway CDs, and two speakers emit the sound of a man talking. The other two walls host an over-sized version of one of the nameplate photos bearing the name *Sonny Simmons*, and across from that, oversized printouts of the search error message "404: cannot be found" yielded when an Artpace preparator tried to look up *Sonny Simmons* on Youtube.

Simmons is a highly respected jazz tenor saxophone and English horn player, whose star rose in the bebop scene of San Francisco, but who then faded into obscurity. He apparently even lived on the street, at one point. Fortunately, he was rediscovered, re-recorded, and now tours the U.S. and Europe (there's even some possibility he may come here and do a concert on Artpace's roof). Dikeou met *Simmons* in New York about 15 years ago, and they've been friends ever since.

It seems an odd coupling, this avant-garde magazine publisher, editor, gallery artist and Brown graduate, and an 80-something jazz musician from Louisiana, who had years of hard knocks and whose Louisiana upbringing didn't even furnish him a birth certificate. But Dikeou makes a real go at collaboration. It's circuitous, and immediate, and you should really spend some time with it, as it's less immediately powerful than the ground-floor installations. But Dikeou's sense of mission, in honoring this man who made and makes art, who seemed to disappear but now enjoys his redemption, is deep. Everybody knows, presumably, that success in the arts is a crapshoot; it isn't a meritocracy based on talent, but a series of happy coincidences based on time and place. Dikeou points this out, and celebrates it.

The speakers broadcast the speaking voice of *Simmons* himself, who commented as Dikeou showed him brass nameplates photographed by her partner in a hotel in Buenos Aires. In that hotel, each room is named for a different jazz musician. There are several Latin American musicians honored and, funnily, several of the jazz greats' names are misspelled. As Dikeou flicked through these nameplate photos for *Simmons*, he made remarks about each one.

That *Simmons* sounds warm, engaging, and knowledgeable is no surprise, mentioning, say, Cole Porter's impact on 20th century music, or chuckling and noting that his mother loved Bessie Smith. Fascinating to me, though, is the way that *Simmons* talks directly to the musicians whose names he's reading, as in, "Hellooo Bix!" (e.g. Biederbecke, the trumpeter) "Take care of yourself, wherever you are!"

It's an openhearted recording, and *Simmons* clearly enjoyed making it. He laughs frequently, and you will, too. Given the deep, warm presence of his voice, and his tradition, and the reference made to the materials of music with all the wood and photos of wood, the experience becomes a generous and inclusive one, however misspelled.

Make sure to pick up one of the free copies of *The Sonny Simmons Quartet Performs the Music of Charlie Parker* that Dikeou is offering as a gift for you; the bebop is fantastic (I'm listening to it right now) and *Simmons*' "Cowboy" remarks are the last track. You'll enjoy spending time with him.