

Sarah Stevens

Co-Lab, Austin

Through March 26

by Allison Myers



Sarah Stevens

Palatial Hemorrhages

2011

Mixed media installation

Courtesy of the artist

Sarah Stevens' recent Co-Lab installation, *Partial Hemorrhages*, has all the appearances of a girly '80s sleepover gone awry. Sheets of mylar with neon pink and yellow paint cover the walls, while fluorescent make-up bags, silly string, magazines and found pieces of consumer detritus clump in the corners and walkways. Sometimes the bits and pieces become so entangled with each other that they seem on the verge of exploding out, à la Nickelodeon's Aggro Crag, in a shimmery blast of glitter and confetti.

Stevens has a way of making sensory overload seem natural, even inhabitable, and the visual effect is often striking. On the whole, however, the installation is a little too sparse. Though the small moments pack a punch, the work lacks the encompassing all-over appeal of many aestheticized environments—Yayoi Kusama's work with pattern and mirrors comes to mind, or more recently, Jessica Stockholder's colorful, built-up installations.

Stevens' multi-media installation *The Staypuft Harbinger* worked in a way that *Partial Hemorrhages* fails. *Staypuft* served as Co-Lab's inaugural exhibition in 2008, and marked the transformation of the space from Stevens' studio to Sean Gaulager's gallery. It was a collage two years in the making, and as an ongoing studio installation, it afforded Stevens the chance to fully explore the detail-heavy work she's so good at. *Partial Hemorrhages*, on the other hand, feels

rushed and lacks the meaty layers of the earlier work. Instead of thick strata of colorful, collaged objects it stays largely within a single-dimension, giving it less punch than its predecessor. Luckily, however, Stevens has conceived the work as a four-part cycle, in which she will reconfigure and rework the current arrangement. It's possible that the first show's sparseness served as a basic ground layer for the next manifestations—but it would have been more exciting to see it start with a bang, and get even bigger.

Beyond the visual impact of the work, the history of Stevens' involvement with the space brings forth a stimulating second layer to the piece. Talking with the artist at the opening, she pointed out the visible quirks of the gallery: the open insulation her friend hung still serves as the gallery's ceiling, and even now you can see patches of her studio's yellow paint peeking out under the gallery's white walls. At the risk of sounding sentimental, it was very charming. Her work is wrapped up in the history of the space and these tiny stories make her installation ring with personal narrative.

I'd like to see these personal traces incorporated more fully into the next cycle of the installation. In any case, it will be fun to see how Stevens adjusts and manipulates the environment. It's rare to be able to see this kind of labor-intensive process in action. I recommend you follow along. The next openings are March 19 and 26, both from 7-11 pm.

Allison Myers is pursuing her Ph.D. in art history at the University of Texas Austin.

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