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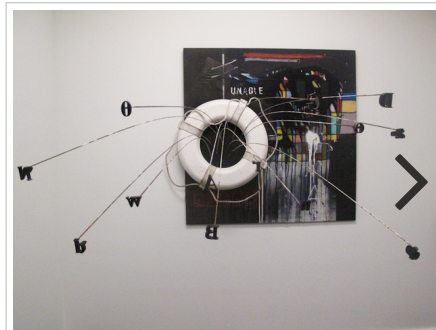
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CREATIVE SPACE

Co-Lab launches first show, *Row Home*, at downtown N Space in time for WEST Studio Tour

By Michael 5.18.12 |
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Mark Johnson's "Row Home" opening this weekend at Co-Lab Photo by Jessica Pages

This weekend is the inaugural West Austin Studio Tour(<http://www.westaustinstudiotour.com/>) (WEST), where established and unexpected gallery spaces in the wide geographic area covering "the rest of Austin" will show off their studio works and their most recent collections.

The weekend will also be the newly rebranded East Side arts nonprofit Co-Lab(<http://colabspace.org/>)'s inaugural show in their brand new "N Space," a collaboration with downtown architectural firm, Nelsen Partners(<http://www.nelsenpartners.com/>). Former office space has been transformed by the creative team into unique exhibition spaces that feature large-scale pieces normally reserved for galleries — including a live performance installation that will be on display in the firm's lobby.

For this brand new venture that merges the experimental aesthetics of the East Side with refined space of downtown, Co-Lab's directors Sean Gaulager, Austin Nelsen and Chris Whiteburch, all agreed upon inviting visual artist Mark Johnson(<http://scadpaintingnow.wordpress.com/2010/03/01/mark-johnson-in-two-person-show-at-pump-project-austin-tx/>), known to many in the Austin art scene as the Operations Manager at AMOA-Arthouse(<http://amoa-arthouse.org/>), to showcase his talents.

"Mark works his ass off for this art community," says Whiteburch, who heads up Special Projects and Facilities for Co-Lab, "but he's also an amazing artist, so it just made perfect sense to ask him."

Gaulager, Co-Lab Executive Director and curator for the exhibition, adds, "We thought about people who would fit this space, and Mark was on that short list. We're definitely pushing the boundaries of what this space can be — the same as we do at Co-Lab — so it's really a great relationship for everyone involved."

In his intensely personal collection, *Row Home*(<http://colabspace.org/#21446818628>), Johnson transposes evocative symbols that represent profound and unexpected transition, the upheaval of one's expectations for safety in life. The title of the show comes from his recurring themes of, quite literally, rowboats and houses, which represent both security and direction for the artist. "They way I see it, everyone's in their own row boat with however many oars they have," he laughs. "I have one oar, for example, and I keep going in circles."

Johnson's pieces transcend the flat canvases hanging on the Nelsen hallway walls, jutting into the visual space to remind you of the inescapable aspect of transition in life. The sculptural elements of the pieces as well as the obscured messages scrawled on and around the paintings require the viewer to fully interact with the paintings and experience them in a fully investigative manner.

Enhancing that up-close-and-personal feeling for Johnson, the exhibit includes references to his lost childhood home, his newborn son, and even his reactions to the closing of the downtown AMOA space. "It's extremely personal and sort of overwhelming to see these pieces up on the walls," he explains. "I'm still reacting to these guys. But it has been very cathartic for me."

Like the majority of Austin's eclectic art community, Johnson and the gallery owners are eager to see how WEST shapes up over the course of the weekend and grateful to be a part of the expansive offerings.

"There are definitely new challenges to coming over to the other side of the freeway, for sure," says Gaulager, who has over 10 years of experience curating shows in every type of gallery space. "But with the overwhelming success of EAST, the tradeoff is going to be in reaching an audience we wouldn't normally reach. We all get easily entrenched in our own neighborhoods... so this is

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