

Co-Lab Projects has big plans for last few months in downtown space

LIFE By Caitlin Greenwood - Special to the American-Statesman



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Soda_Jerk is a two-person video collective. "Astro Black" is a two-channel digital video on display in "Unrealpolitik." Contributed

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Monday, June 26, 2017

Co-Lab Projects began in 2008 with a gallery space at 613 Allen St. and, after a couple of years of successful exhibitions and events, cemented itself as a cultural hub. On any given weekend night you could find a steady stream of people discussing the work, knocking back beers and just hanging out. But Co-Lab wasn't immune to the rent increases that affected many arts groups on the city's east side. Programming started shifting to their annex gallery, the downtown N Space, and 613 Allen closed for good in 2014.

Co-Lab now occupies Demo Gallery, an empty commercial space on Congress Avenue that's owned by longtime donor the Nelsen Partners. They have use of the space until this fall, when the building is scheduled to be demolished to make way for new construction. The industrial, exposed concrete aesthetic of the gallery and its central location have no doubt influenced some programming, but what hasn't changed is the kind of work and the audience it attracts. Executive director and gallery curator Sean Gaulager talked with us about the space, upcoming exhibitions and where Co-Lab grows from here.

What attracted you to the Demo space to begin with?

The first time we saw the building at 721 Congress was during the summer of 2013 when Austin Nelsen was looking for a space to host "Lame, Lewd and Depressed." After trying to secure buildings like the old La Bare male strip club south of the river and other empty storefronts in the downtown area, he was put in contact with the architect and former owner Sinclair Black, who ended up giving us access to the building for a few months. At that time the roof was more like a waterfall, the bathroom hardly existed and the space generally felt abandoned, decrepit and creepy as hell, which we thought was perfect for presenting \$70,000 paintings of ghastly figures and patterned works that seemed custom-made to address the textures of the building.

Flash forward three years ... when Nelsen Development offered us the window displays to showcase artwork and the side of the building for a new mural. This offer was expanded, resulting in Co-Lab occupying the front third of the space (2,500 square feet) to program a series of exhibitions, the back loading area for a workshop/studio, and the basement for screenings and performances. We couldn't be more appreciative for this generous donation of space and have been working harder than ever to take full advantage of it while we can.

Co-Lab's Demo space offers a unique audience for artists looking to show downtown — how has that audience changed from your former eastside location?

Our audience hasn't changed as much as it's expanded to include people who might not normally make the trip to an eastside gallery (or any gallery for that matter). At our original location, we were only open during events and by appointment, because the gallery was not in a neighborhood with significant foot traffic and open hours did not produce the attendance to make it worthwhile to staff. Since we opened Demo Gallery (in May 2016) ... we've had much greater engagement with more general and diverse populations of visitors. It's been a struggle to keep our base community intact and ask them to attend downtown events, but overall people seem committed to supporting us and finding a way to experience our programs.

How do artists approach the space? Do you feel like the space sometimes encourages a different piece or aesthetic out of an artist?

Because Demo is not a perfect white cube, artists are required to deal with the oddities of the space in a similar way that Co-Lab exhibitions and programs are generally known for, regardless of where they take place. The shows we've curated for Demo have been expanded versions of what we really loved at our original location, exhibitions that transform and/or engage with architecture and fully immerse audiences in the experience. The Demo space is pretty unique, and its rawness is something most exhibition spaces lack; this often results in visitors asking if we are open, still setting up or, "What will this be?" But to artists the unfinished look, high ceilings and cavernous feel can be inspiring.

What shows do you have coming up?

"Unrealpolitik" opened June 10. It features three Australian artists, Mark Hilton and the two-person video collective Soda_Jerk, as well as two local artists, Elizabeth McDonald Schwaiger and Ted Carey. The exhibition includes painting, sculpture, multichannel videos and installations that address our contemporary landscape of (alternative) facts, fake news, gaslighting and cognitive dissonance by using dark humor, pop culture and cryptic imagery. Then we have "Expedition Batikback" opening Aug. 5. This exhibition is conceptualized and curated by Steef Crombach, who has been running a workshop in the back of Demo for several months teaching the artists and supplying them with materials to translate their compositions, color palettes and painting style to the batik fabric dyeing process. The exhibition travels to the Netherlands after its run at Demo.

In September, we pay tribute to Claude van Lingen with a sprawling retrospective of his life and work. We'll spend the summer putting together the complete tale of Claude's journey through life and art-making, which brought him so many places before landing in Austin over 10 years ago. We will be borrowing work from collections and re-creating a piece that was supposedly censored from the São Paulo Biennial in 1975. Lastly, the grand finale, "Good Mourning Tis of Thee," curated and directed by Alyssa Taylor Wendt, will address topical issues such as architecture, development, displacement, cultural significance, death and transformation and utilize both local artists and performers from Texas and around the country.

How long will you be occupying Demo, and what are the current Co-Lab plans for expansion?

We will be producing exhibitions and public programs at Demo through October, making the whole programmatic run about a year and a half. After we mourn/celebrate Demo's destruction, we hope to open a new space, possibly a studio complex/contemporary arts center. However, this has been in the works for some time, and we've found it extremely difficult to find the right building for the right price with the right lease terms. As we all know, Austin real estate is becoming increasingly unaffordable, and there are so few industrial buildings in the central area. We are continuing the search and talking with other local organizations about development partnerships. We will definitely be expanding and establishing a new location — it may just be a matter of time.


CO-LAB PROJECTS' DEMO GALLERY

721 Congress Ave.

Open noon to 6 p.m. Thursday-Saturday

co-labprojects.org



 “Unrealpolitik” features Ted Carey’s “Shoe Shim/Toe Tied/All In (U.L.o.B.).” The exhibit address our contemporary landscape of alternative facts, fake news, gaslighting and cognitive dissonance by using dark humor, pop culture and cryptic imagery. Contributed

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