

STERLING ALLEN

BACKDROP & BLOCKER

Sep 22–Oct 22, 2017

Sterling Allen: *Backdrop & Blocker*  
by Betsy Huete

If Donald Judd and Barney The Dinosaur bore a lovechild, it might resemble *Backdrop & Blocker* (2017)—the porous, quasi-levitating box looming large over Sterling Allen’s exhibition of the same name in Lawndale’s O’Quinn Gallery. Too large within the space to be considered a sculpture in its own right yet too small to be regarded fully as an architectural imposition, *Backdrop & Blocker* echoes Allen’s modus operandi pinging throughout this space, which is to elicit desire from the viewer via frustration, even outright irritation. He exacts this frustration by letting the viewer swim in a steady state of dislocation between sculpture and installation, and by asking important questions regarding what a sculpture is actually supposed to do. What is the purpose of a sculpture? Where does a sculpture ultimately reside? And what happens when we mash previous and current ecosystems of a sculpture together?

Although Allen may be fundamentally asking questions about sculpture, this is really a photography exhibition. That’s because *Backdrop & Blocker* exists not as a singularly experiential installation, nor does it rely on a series of sculptures designed necessarily for individual consideration. Rather, each object in the room functions mostly in relation to the other, constantly framing and reframing the shot, enveloping the viewer in a kind of infinite and ever-shifting tableaux. This is how Allen enacts the friction: even as we approach these works first hand, they constantly push

us back, asking us not to consider them as they are, but rather how they should be mediated and framed. The meta-experience as the actual experience poses compelling—if not disturbing—questions about how we now approach what we see and how we see it. As millions of people Instagram their dinner, for instance, we now wonder: is the first-hand experience actually sitting in the restaurant, or is it choosing the right filter to make it look the most delicious prior to mass dissemination on the internet?

The most poignant case he makes for the mediated experience-as-experience is the direct comparison between a tie-dye t-shirt (Untitled, 2017) and its photographed counterpart (also Untitled, 2017). Through one of two viewfinders bisecting *Backdrop & Blocker*, both shirt and photo are flattened and equalized into a tightly-cropped, rainbow swirly color field. But although we can see the real thing on one end of the room, the photograph on the opposite end somehow makes us feel the texture of the shirt more than the shirt itself. Allen understands that it’s not simply how the picture intimately pores over the shirt’s tiny lint balls; it is also the ratcheting up of tension between what we can see but cannot touch.

In order for the viewer to devise and re-devise tableaux, she must feel compelled to move throughout the space—and this is ultimately how Allen rethinks and interrogates a sculpture’s assumed function. The sculptures here are banal enough to evade close, singular engagement, acting instead as motors pushing and funneling

us around the room. Sometimes they even stop us cold in our tracks, like the hanging, flat wooden sculpture *Prankster* (2017). Wavering at about head height, Prankster intervenes as the harlequin pattern of one side clashes violently with its purple backdrop. As we side-step to get a view of the other side—a hypnotic cheshire cat—our eyes fall to where *Untitled* (2017) leans against the corner. A truncated, wishbone-looking piece of wood with a child's kickball lodged in between two branches gives way to a soaring line created by the seam of two walls conjoining. The line leads our eye up to the ceiling where we run into a singular, earthy-red mesal bean punctuating the corner. Eager to discern a pattern, our eyes shoot back out to the rest of the space, discovering tiny red dots peppering corners throughout the gallery.

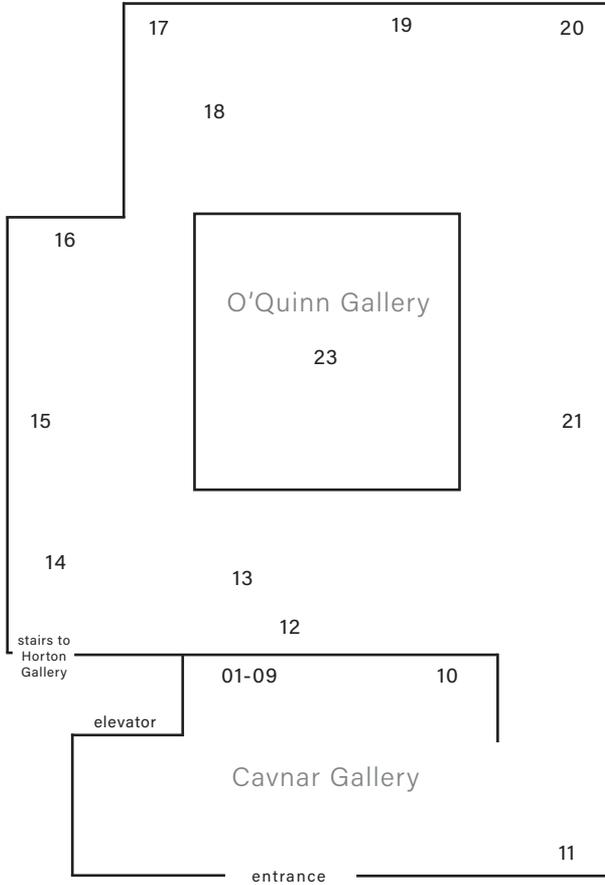
But to say these works' only purpose is to shuffle us around would be inaccurate because as we traverse the space, moments of humor and surprising juxtapositions occur, giving us pause. The jutting wood shelf and sad plastic bag of *Untitled* (2017) anthropomorphize into a half-deflated Pepto Bismol bunny hesitant to dive off the board into the ruddy sea-foam pool below. The sea-foam colored blanket lying on the floor holds vaguely-shaped wooden torsos of the *Frozen Sculpture* and *Frozen Bit* series (all 2017) that Allen has painted various shades of baby blue to mimic natural lighting and shadows.

The blanket lying underneath the *Frozen* series—being that it previously served a utilitarian function of wrapping the work

for transit as opposed to being part of the work—harkens to a greater question Allen is asking about what constitutes a sculpture's true home. Perhaps a sculpture's ecosystem is not solely the pristine white cube nor the studio from whence it came, but rather a conflation of the two. So we see multiple instances in *Backdrop & Blocker* of linkages to the world outside this gallery: in the blanket, yes, but also with *Stitches* (2017) hanging above the staircase, its thick, mangled black lines acting as an organic offshoot to the stairs leading to the Horton Gallery above. We see it with *Pappy's Stopper* (2017), the hanging tennis ball acting as a barrier to an exit door. We also see it with the sparse, introductory trail of pieces located in the Grace R. Canvar Gallery. The *Untitled* series (all 2017)—unevenly mounted photos on wood of the mesal beans juxtaposed with *Backdrop & Blocker's* same purple—serve as a foreshadowing device, while the downward facing puzzles of *Magnum Series 4280: Bayern, Germany* (2017) and *York Series 4335: A Century Old* (2017) push us diagonally back and forth through the Canvar Gallery into O'Quinn like an Atari ball in Pong.

Perhaps most importantly, we see it quite literally in the second viewfinder giving us a peek to the outside world. Like a much more voyeuristic Turrell *Skyspace*, we quietly contemplate what we see. But instead of blank sky and an occasional bird, here we contemplate the sidewalk, the gas station across the street, the quickly passing cars, and a truncated tree holding branches—branches not unlike the one sitting on the floor back inside the gallery.

Sterling Allen  
*Backdrop & Blocker*  
 Exhibition Checklist



Cavnar Gallery

- 01. Untitled, 2017  
 Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
 13 ¼ x 10 ¾ inches
- 02. Untitled, 2017  
 Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
 13 1/8 x 10 ¼ inches
- 03. Untitled, 2017  
 Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
 12 7/8 x 10 ½ inches

- 04. Untitled, 2017  
 Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
 13 1/8 x 10 3/8 inches
- 05. Untitled, 2017  
 Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
 13 ¼ x 10 ¾ inches
- 06. Untitled, 2017  
 Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
 13 1/8 x 10 ¼ inches
- 07. Untitled, 2017  
 Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
 13 ¼ x 10 1/8 inches

08. Untitled, 2017  
Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
13 1/8 x 10 3/4 inches

09. Untitled, 2017  
Digital Inkjet Print, wood  
13 3/8 x 10 inches

10. *Magnum Series 4280:  
Bayern, Germany*, 2017  
Found object  
26 1/2 x 36 1/4 inches

11. *York Series 4335:  
A Century Old*, 2017  
Found object  
23 3/4 x 31 1/4 inches

O'Quinn Gallery

12. Untitled, 2017  
Wood, found objects  
36 x 11 1/2 x 29 inches

13. *Frozen Sculpture (Standing)*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
36 x 27 1/2 x 12 inches

*Frozen Sculpture (Headstand)*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
36 x 12 x 27 1/2 inches

*Frozen Sculpture (Reclining)*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
12 x 36 x 26 inches

*Frozen Bit #1*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
1 1/2 x 5 1/2 x 3 1/2 inches

*Frozen Bit #2*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
7 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches

*Frozen Bit #3*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
1 1/2 x 3 1/2 x 10 1/2 inches

*Frozen Bit #4*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
7 x 3 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches

*Frozen Bit #5*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
3 1/4 x 3 1/2 x 1 1/2 inches

*Sea Blanket*, 2017  
Found object  
81 1/2 x 71 1/2 inches

14. *Stitches*, 2017  
Wood, paint, hardware  
22 x 67 x 8 inches

15. Untitled, 2017  
Digital Inkjet Print  
19 x 13 inches

16. *Wobbly One*, 2017  
Found objects  
83 x 25 1/2 x 17 1/2 inches

Untitled, 2017  
Found objects  
155 1/2 x 70 inches

17. Untitled, 2017  
Found objects  
33 x 11 x 8 inches

18. *Prankster*, 2017  
Wood, paint, hardware  
66 x 68 x 1 1/2 inches

19. Untitled, 2011  
Fabric, enamel, grommets  
55 x 108 inches

20. *Pappy's Stopper*, 2017  
Found object  
52 x 2 3/4 x 2 3/4 inches

21. Untitled, 2017  
Found object  
23 x 18 inches

22. Untitled, 2017  
Mountain Laurel beans  
Dimensions variable

23. *Backdrop & Blocker*, 2017  
Wood, paint  
147 3/4 x 209 x 234 inches

**Sterling Allen**  
*Backdrop & Blocker*

**Sterling Allen** holds an MFA in Sculpture from the Milton Avery Graduate School of Arts at Bard College and a BFA in Studio Art from the University of Texas at Austin. He is a co-founder and co-director of Okay Mountain, an artist collective and former gallery based in Austin, Texas. As a solo artist and in collaboration with the group, he has exhibited, organized, and completed projects at venues throughout the United States and received several residencies including the Artpace International Artist-In-Residence Program in San Antonio, Texas and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha, Nebraska. He is currently an Assistant Professor in Studio Art at Texas State University in San Marcos, TX.

**Betsy Huete** is an artist and writer from Houston. She received her BFA from Rice in 2006 and her MFA in Sculpture from the University of Houston in 2014. Huete has had solo and two-person exhibitions at Art League Houston, Lawndale Art Center, Matchbox Gallery, and galleryHOMELAND, and participated in Houston's Fringe Festival in 2012. She attended the artist residency Mildred's Lane during the summers of 2012 and 2013, and was subsequently included in the residency's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the fall of 2012. A frequent contributor to Glasstire, Huete has also written for The Great God Pan is Dead, [gulfcoastmag.org](http://gulfcoastmag.org), and served as the assistant editor for the Art Lies section of Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts in 2013. Additionally, in 2012 she collaborated on *Dis Manibus: A Taxonomy of Ghosts From Popular Forms* published by Information as Material in the UK.





Sterling Allen, *Backdrop & Blocker* (installation view), 2017

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