

# Sixty

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## Color it Clean: An Interview with Jeffrey Michael Austin

written by Lyndon Barrois Jr.



*I first met Jeffrey Michael Austin through an exhibition we were a part of at the Chicago Artist Coalition in 2015, during which he was a resident in their HATCH program. He then had successive projects in the St. Louis vicinity where I was living, and I maintained an ongoing admiration for the cleverness, humor, and versatility of his practice (he is also an accomplished musician, one-third of the trio Growing Concerns). He is an artist that is responsive to his environment, locating the wonders of natural elements, as well as wonder-ing about the state of human nature. His re-staging of common objects and occurrences straddle the playful and the political. As the latter becomes more and more urgent, he engages in critique that arises out of a call for empathy. Over a very long email correspondence, we reflected on some recent bodies of work, as he prepared to open his solo exhibition 'Outstanding Balance' at Heaven Gallery.*

**Lyndon Barrois Jr:** It is notable that there are a lot of stars in the recent work, and stars for me always relate to the movement of time and distance. With the floor works, the components involved settled my mind on the phrase *scrubbing time* (that function of manipulating audio or

video on smartphones), which does the interesting work of bringing different temporal moments together: the mop bucket (and cleaning for that matter), and of course the stars, aren't quite marked by digital technology, but the joining of their contexts through language bring them to this moment. I suppose that's the excitement in making—not just a surrealist juxtaposition, but in regards to time, it's like a haptic montage. Do notions of time have any part of your thinking about these works?

**Jeffrey Michael Austin:** There are so many different perspectives and twists on time that come into play throughout this whole body of work. With the floor works, it was all about bringing together distant points on this vast spectrum of time and space; joining the gesture of routine cleaning—a task that is small, both in its relative [in]significance in time, and in its banal humanness—with a view of the cosmos: endlessly vast in its ancientness, omnipresence and inexplicability. I find a real joy and profundity in collapsing these micro- and macro-views into singular objects or situations because they immediately take on a sort of absurd embodiment of the human condition itself—our conflicting perceptions always running parallel through our lives (half-aware of the untouchable mystery of our being-at-all, half-absorbed in the seriousness with which we take the concerns of day-to-day life).

There's also a clear play with time taking place in the mirror works—a freezing of time and a challenging of the familiar. These works are rooted in the overarching desire that fuels most all of my work: to set up a relationship between the work and its visitor that leads them to question their own faith in the faculties they possess for understanding the conditions of their living environment. In simpler terms: a means through which to constantly be encouraging the question, “Do I truly have a grasp on what's going on here?”, where the work becomes less about the object on the wall and more about the visceral questions and curiosities that suddenly fill the air once the relationship is made. “What are the elemental conditions of my environment? What am I feeling or experiencing? Do these align?” As it pertains to any of my work: if a person walks away from a piece with an even slightly higher degree of openness or sensitivity to the magic and malleability of the world around them, I consider it successful. For this reason, it's becoming increasingly crucial to me—most clearly in the mirror works—that my artworks resemble subtle and ubiquitous objects or situations more so than institutional art objects.



*Image: Jeffrey Michael Austin, "Puddle (Trees)," Resin, digital prints, found objects and paint; 30 x 40 x 4 inches; 2017." A floor-based sculpture is placed discreetly on the sidewalk of a public park, creating the illusion of a puddle reflecting the sky and tree branches above and littered with various objects. Photo by Dulcee Boehm.*

**LB:** I want to linger on this idea of conventional/institutional art objects for a moment, because it's quite clear that objects are important to you. You make beautiful sculptural moments, but what I'm getting from you is that there is a further psychological activation you are after that seeks more than simply being confronted with an alluring form, but is directly related to how that form disrupts the perception of a known reality?

**JMA:** Yeah, exactly. It's beginning to feel essential for me to make work that—in its form and presentation—sheds the characteristics that might lead someone to immediately read the object as an "art object". I'm interested in creating things that one confronts and absorbs into their body and experience *before* recognizing that it's an artwork—objects that are experienced candidly as parts of "the world" before being interrupted and clouded by some relative association with the historical and institutional art canon. It's a difficult thing to accomplish without abandoning entirely the established and familiar channels of exhibiting artwork (an option I've been leaning into lately with bodies of work like the *Puddles* series). As soon as we so much as approach a space or institution built for the exhibition of art, we throw up a certain kind of experiential defense or filter, expecting that these things we're about to



encounter will (and ought only to) exist in a sort of insular and exclusive relationship to all the other artworks we've encountered before, confining them immediately within the tight parameters of a particular conversation—one that is broad, but certainly less broad than “human experience.”

What I enjoy about the works I've made so far with this in mind — the puddles and mirrors — is the sort of quiet invisibility they take on when placed outside the walls of these institutions. Not unlike some of the contracted labor I've done in construction or museum exhibition preparation, it's as though the goal of these works is that they ultimately become unseen, unassuming—if I've achieved the aim of the craft, you'll likely never notice it existed. But still: you've absorbed it, below your cognizance, and it's played into your understanding of the conditions surrounding you before you had a chance to realize and come to terms with the work itself. I know that might feel like a tall and rambling order, but it's what I'm going for.

**LB:** Some of what you are describing is not far from the 'provisional' aesthetic that is widely embraced, but I do think your gestures are more pointed. I also identify with the sentiment of working in exhibition prep and have been struck by the forms that settle into place when crates, tools, dollies, blankets, etc. are lying around. These are also quite mundane situations, in most cases, invisible without very deliberate framing and placement to bring them into the light. You on the other hand, are using mundane situations but pushing them into absurdity, which requires less guided attention for the viewer, in or out of a gallery situation.

As for the mirror works, I humorously went with it! And thought, “Is it hot in here? Like, is the room hot, or is it these works?!” You're simulating condensation and evaporation, it's an interesting way of shaking up the viewer's sense of the environment. What sort of space are you referring to, or rather, what is the ideal space for them to be experienced?

**JMA:** Yes!! You're touching on exactly what I was trying to unpack earlier. The work is absolutely about that shaking up of one's faith in their own senses, their learned tools for understanding the situation they're standing in. I've played with these mirrors in a variety of contexts. In my solo exhibition *Stay alive* at Chicago Artists Coalition, I actually sealed the room off and had several warm-mist humidifiers going in the space. So when you entered, you were hit with the actual presence of intense heat and humidity before encountering these faux-steamy works. It pushed that question of one's grasp on the environment even further. Possibly even a bit too far—which I only say because a surprising number of the folks that spoke with me just readily accepted the effect as real, taking the gestures on the mirrors' surfaces to be something I must have done just moments before they walked in. It's all playing into the same goal I was describing earlier: how to create a situation that leads its visitor to a

place of higher scrutiny, humility, and openness to change and to the unknown and—in that sense—to a loss of control.

**LB:** You have exploited the multidimensional nature of reflective surfaces to achieve this. [The mop/bucket works] have me thinking of sinking in space, as opposed to floating. These spills are thresholds. Portals of celestial quicksand, stardust inverted to the floor, though someone's floor is commonly someone else's ceiling. In outer space there is no *up*. This is a slightly different effect than the small spills and puddle sculptures I've seen, in which a mirroring is more straightforward. But the outer space imagery seems to imply an alter-dimensional soap, or solvent.

**JMA:** The floor pieces in *Strange Mess* are definitely about this interdimensional play. I see the choice to push the reflected imagery to a mirage of something clearly impossible (a view of the cosmos from a lit, indoor space) from the more credible reflections (cloudy sky, tree branches, etc.) found in the outdoor puddles as a significant shift in the conversation around these works. With the other spill works, the fact that the reflection could be credible if placed in the right conditions/context keeps the work in the realm of quiet illusion that we were just discussing. But that's not really where my motivations and interests lie with these celestial pieces. I feel like the push to a reflected image that immediately reads as impossible allows the piece to rest as an art object—to become a more guided space for contemplation on the phenomenon of reflection itself; on those thresholds you referred to.

I was first attracted to the effect of reflection in general for the often-overlooked quality of magic it produces as it opens things up dimensionally —the way it plays so immediately with our perception of what we see empirically as “real” or “not real”. It's just one of many examples I go to when contemplating the ways in which we normalize and grow comfortable with our perceptions of the world around us, as though there's anything about this life that doesn't appropriately fall into the category of “wild hallucination.” So, to intentionally play with and skew those expectations, to say, “There's something strange and mysterious here, now, with us in this space [and all spaces], visible if we loosen our perspective” and to make it visible through this kind of absurd, playful gesture—it allows things to feel heavy and light all at once.



*Image: Another sculptural work by Jeffrey Michael Austin from his solo-exhibition “Strange Mess” at The Luminary, ” ‘Stay afloat (caution, attention) 2.’ Plastic, wood, polyester resin and digital print; 42 x 22 x 19.” Depicts a yellow wet floor sign sinking into a puddle that appears to be reflecting a view of the cosmos. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

**LB:** I love that you identified the what and why of a particular element that wasn't working for you, even though I'm sure the audience got a kick out of it. In many ways, those works made sense in that environment. The conditions were set up so the understanding of how such objects could exist was logical. When you strip away those conditions, the cause and effect outcome is less important, it becomes more absurd. From a material standpoint, it's more intriguing; I still don't know how you made them [laughs], and I am okay with that. I often come back to conviction being a primary indicator of a successful affect, but you are actually aiming to create situations where being fully convinced is impossible. Like the point of the trick is that it fails, which is a different kind of magic.

**JMA:** Right, it's something like that... Or maybe the point isn't necessarily for the trick to fail, but rather for you to never realize you went to a magic show [laughs]. It changes from piece to piece, though. The aim of the works is always wholly dependent on the environment in which they're intended to be shown. They're variables in an equation that also includes your grasp of the environment, so as that environment changes, the rest of the equation has to shift to stay balanced.



*Image: Another work from Austin's solo-exhibition "Strange Mess" at The Luminary. "Stay alive (whatever);' Resin, mirror and emergency blankets; the mirror measures 38 x 95 inches; 2017." Above a wall covered in mirrored mylar emergency blankets hangs a large-scale mirror that has been treated with resin to create the illusion of condensation and the recent gesture of a human hand wiping away the steam to spell out the word "WHATEVER." Photo courtesy of the artist.*

**LB:** Also, "Whatever"?

**JMA:** [laughs] Yes, whatever!! This large mirror work originally had a counterpart in *Stay alive* that faced it directly on the opposite wall, mirroring it (literally), and read "FOREVER". These works were grounded in this same conversation regarding time and expectations and perspective. To conflate a concept as vast and abstract and untouchable as "forever" with a phenomenon that reads as very temporary and fleeting and conditional (condensation), but then which still in the same moment is further complicating its own reference by actually being stable or "permanent" in its material form... ahh!

It's again about mixing things up, and doing so by pulling on two polar opposites of a certain spectrum. "FOREVER" being a nod to the end of the spectrum that represents vastness, the unfathomable, the holy, the transcendent; and "WHATEVER" being a nod to the human end, with our unique ability to not only read and analyze the apparent circumstances of life but to also regularly grow *bored* of them! I'm often blown away by our collective capacity to *lack* astonishment, bewilderment, awe... as if we can look at any one detail of this dream of a life on a pebble hurling through an apparently endless vacuum of space and say, "Yeah, that



makes sense.” To say “whatever” at all is to make a kind of false claim of control via the comfort of cool indifference—it’s saying, “I see it, I get it, I don’t care, I’m not impressed”. But these hopeful grasps at control are of course based in fear—of this unknown force that we’re born into.



*Image: An installation by Jeffrey Michael Austin from the group exhibition “Rough Idle” at Chicago Artists Coalition. “Digging A Hole;’ Soil, shovel, electric fans and helium balloon; 10 x 10 x 6 feet; 2015.” Powered, black oscillating fans cause a white helium balloon and a shovel to which it is tied to sway back and forth irregularly at the center of a mound of earth. For as long as the balloon is able to keep the shovel in motion, the shovel digs itself a deeper and wider hole. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

**LB:** We fear what we cannot control, and attempt to control what we are fearful of. This is the case in numerous contexts, of course, a driving human tendency. I agree that dismissal is another way of escaping the confrontation of what we do not understand, or an unwillingness to take a position. This has me thinking of a couple older works of yours, *Digging A Hole* (2015) and *I’m Not Worried About You* (2013). As artists we can be fairly precious about the control we have over how our works operate. I assume that the mechanics of these works were controlled, but they are set up in a way that suggests things could go awry, that their form could be compromised and even dissolve.

**JMA:** Yeah, that precariousness is a crucial element of those works and, I would say, of the bulk of my entire history of work. The way I approach and interpret precariousness—how I choose to materialize it or centralize it in theory—changes from work to work, but it’s always



there in some form or another. In the case of both *Digging A Hole* and *I'm Not Worried About You*, the sense that things “could go awry” that you’re reading was in fact very real, to the point that I was actually surprised by the resilience of both pieces. The central tree in *I'm Not Worried About You* was in fact balancing precariously at the point where it was hatched, being supported by nothing more than a handful of thin black threads that were tied to flathead nails in the wall. If someone were to so much as brush up against it, the whole thing would have collapsed.

Similarly, with *Digging A Hole*, I limited my own control in the piece to simply setting up the initial conditions. The motions of the balloon and shovel from there (if they would continue to move at all!), the way this manipulated the soil, the way the changing soil manipulated the wind currents coming from the fans... the whole of this ecosystem was out of my control. The fact that it remained in persistent balance with the little dance it choreographed itself into for the full several-week run of the show was an impressive feat to me. But, back to your point—it’s the palpability of that precariousness that’s most important. Like, here is this situation that is so fragile and temporary and just barely hanging onto existence by a thread of its own flawed nature. And here we are, serendipitously alive and present in the same moment, able to catch a glimpse of it before it passes. It feels important for us to confront precarity in this way. It’s a force that I believe can really elicit empathy and humility and gratitude — as though we can see and feel the same kind of miraculousness in our own ability to avoid falling into chaos.

**LB:** This is probably a good opportunity to bridge these concerns with your most recent project at Heaven Gallery, *Outstanding Balance*, which is another take on precariousness, but from the vantage points of economic and interpersonal mortality. I’ve been really struck by how astute you are in naming your projects. The titles of your shows are simple and direct, yet engage the content of the work on many levels. This show seems to be a nice, if not natural progression from the work we’ve been discussing, yes?

**JMA:** It’s definitely another thread of this same conversation — drawing together these mundane and uniquely human concerns with contemplations of the cosmos or vast stretches of geologic time. Trying to contextualize and draw attention to these “vantage points of economic and interpersonal mortality”; to the underlying, broader truth of our shared condition; to the impermanence and the mystery of it all. Letting the precariousness and absurdity of our egotism show, humanizing our collective fear, and hopefully in the process giving us a bit of respite from the paralyzing, short-tempered trend toward polarization that seems to be defining our present-day socio-political environment. Along this current, I try to allow the work to open up onto safe grounds for playing with and redetermining one’s sense of value, whether it be economic, social, philosophical, spiritual, etc...



*Image: Jeffrey Michael Austin is pictured installing “That These Things Take Time,” a recent large-scale permanent installation created through the Facebook Artist-In-Residence program at 191 N Wacker in Chicago, IL. Photo by Jack Soltysik.*

And yes, the titles always prove to be important in these kinds of gestures. In the case of *Outstanding Balance*, I feel a reading of the phrase itself serves as a perfect example of how our immersion in economic and interpersonal constructs can so easily skew our perceptions, divide and isolate us, and in the process begin to take control of our emotional and psychological responses. How sad to think that “outstanding balance” is a phrase any of us would recoil from! [laughs]

*Featured Image: A partial view of Jeffrey Michael Austin’s recent solo-exhibition “Outstanding Balance” at Heaven Gallery. The works pictured here include (from left to right) a faux-steamy mirror, a California Redwood sapling placed under a hanging grow light in a mound of soil and ashes from the artist’s personal debt statements, the floor-based mop bucket spill work, a wall-hanging sculptural rendering of a past-due debt statement made from clear rubber and meteorite fragments, two life-size figures dressed in grey chemical hazmat suits frozen in an intimate embrace, and two newspaper front pages respectively announcing the presidential election results of 2008 and 2016, the text redacted with black paint to reveal only the word “peril” on each sheet. Photo courtesy of the artist.*

# MENTAL FLOSS



JEFFREY MICHAEL AUSTIN

ART

## Artist Fuses Surreal Scenes Into Fake Puddles

BY MICHELE DEBCZAK

JANUARY 25, 2018

When the conditions outside are right, puddles can act like windows to different worlds. Chicago-based artist Jeffrey Michael Austin likes to photograph pools of water on the street that mirror fragments of the sky and cityscape above. But when he isn't waiting to stumble upon an artfully-placed puddle in the real world, he's creating striking street :

These sculptures, spotted by [Co.Design](#), combine surreal images with the ordinary sight of a trash-filled puddle. Austin uses photographic prints and polyester resin to make his puddles. They're designed to lay flat on a street or hard floor, kind of like the fake vomit you'd find at a practical joke store, only a lot more appealing. Sometimes his puddles reflect typical images, like a cloudy blue sky, but more unusual scenes like swirling nebulae also find their way into his work. Real props, like trash and plastic cups, help to ground the pieces in reality.

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Austin has exhibited his puddle art at the Luminary in St. Louis, Missouri; the University Galleries at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois; DEMO Project and Enos Parkin Springfield, Illinois; and SideCar gallery in Hammond, Indiana. You can check out some highlights from his project below and visit his Instagram page and website for more.



JEFFREY MICHAEL AUSTIN



JEFFREY MICHAEL AUSTIN



## Strange Mess: Puddles of Skies and Galaxies by Jeffrey Michael Austin

JANUARY 16, 2018

KATE SIERZPUTOWSKI



Chicago-based artist Jeffrey Michael Austin spends a lot of time photographing the puddles that collect on his city’s sidewalks and streets, observing the mirror-like quality that occurs when the sun hits the water at just the right angle. Eager to remake these special moments of reflection, Austin began creating his own sculptural puddles that appear to reflect the sky above. The works incorporate small bits of debris to strengthen the work’s illusion, while also adding to the quotidian nature of each false pool.

“The Puddles came from my desire to make work that at first glance feels mundane and unassuming, a candid situation you wouldn’t immediately regard as or associate with an art experience,” said Austin. “I’d hoped that in this way they would gently present themselves as yet another detail of your natural environment, before then unfurling with a kind of subtle and surprising magic — an extraordinary quality that you have to grapple with for a moment before facing it with any criticality.”

Austin likes to present his puddles in their “natural habitat” so they are not initially read as art. He hopes his small reflections of the sky (and more recently galaxies) spark a moment of curiosity in the audience they reach, making one rethink their expectations of the surrounding world.

You can view more of Austin’s in situ puddle sculptures, as well as browse a selection of the artist’s candid puddle photography on his Instagram.







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# Sixty



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*Published on November 24, 2017*

## The Terrain Biennial at Enos Park

written by **Maggie Kunze**





*This review is part of our Sixty Regional project which partners with artists, writers, and artist-run spaces to highlight art happening throughout the Midwest and Illinois.*

A stray cat leaps through untamed grass after a cricket, a well-loved teddy bear rests against a tree, and a sign marking the historic neighborhood of Enos Park bears the marks of that history gone by. Though observed on the opening night of the 2017 Terrain Biennial, these are not details of the artworks spread throughout Springfield's north side, but a collection of ordinary moments that exist here every night, with or without an audience.

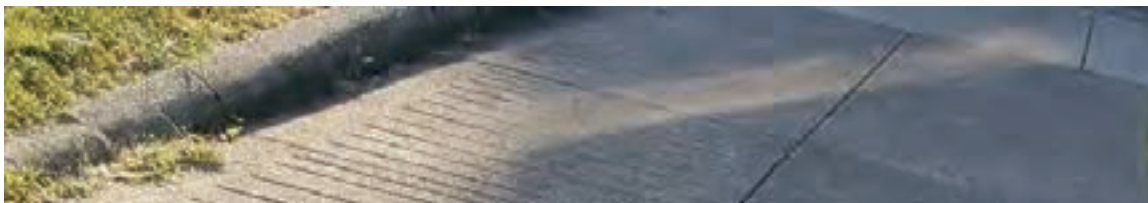
It is well-practiced disregard for such details that lead me to nearly miss a puddle of water, littered with debris, reflecting the tree branches that hover above. Only a closer look reveals the pool is not actually water, but resin, and the branches are not a reflection, but a painted image. By demanding a second look at a seemingly ordinary circumstance, Jeffrey Michael Austin's "spill" piece is emblematic of the experience of travelling through the Terrain Biennial. The Enos Park outpost, organized by DEMO Project's Allison Lacher and Jeff Robinson, is one of many featured in the international exhibition, where, for six weeks, residents' yards, porches, and balconies are host to installations.

Just across the street, another yard is transformed, this one by the collaborative team of Amanda Bowles and Jesse Vogler. Two sculptures suspended by steel frames stand pillar-like on either side of the home's walkway. Chain link, snow fence, and mini-blinds are layered with neon painted aluminum screen to create a collapsed, hazy atmosphere. Backlit by the afternoon sun, the works emulate a wavering focus between sunspots and settling dust—a view that could perhaps be seen by looking out from the windows of the home that sits just behind.

Underscoring the reciprocal relationship between art and site is the accompanying neighborhood map, where the artists' names are listed beside those of local property owners. Among the 17 marked sites scattered between N Grand Ave and Miller St is a display of lawn ornaments and toys, reorganized into absurd assemblages. While Gail Simpson and Aristotle Georgiades repurpose plastic materials to explore how we use ornamentation to express ownership, on another block, the natural is reclaiming its own property. In an abandoned home's overgrown yard, an oversized dandelion, fabricated by artist Betsey Dollar, towers over an audience that may otherwise pass without notice.

Even with the sun lowering, I choose to explore the neighborhood on foot, meaning much of my time is spent travelling from point A to point B (literally, according the site map that guides me). While normally a practice as mundane as a daily commute, I feel compelled to observe more closely every home I pass. As I near a corner, the outstretched glow of a bright porch light brings anticipation. There is no sign marking this as the site of an artwork, but what am I missing if I don't stop to look?

My legs are growing tired when I reach 1161 North 3rd Street, fixed at the far corner of the map, where artist Heather Brammeier has utilized found materials to transform the façade of an abandoned home into a playground-like installation. Wooden triangles and repurposed ladders are arranged into jungle gym structures on the lawn. A colorful ladder fashioned from garden hose climbs past the boarded up second-story to reach through a darkened attic window. Across the street, an abandoned couch sits on the curb, facing the work. It's inadvertent, but in this moment, no longer irrelevant. It's an invitation of sorts. A call to rest the body from its passage to somewhere else, and let the mind wander up, into the veil of the newly unfamiliar.









## SAY UNCLE: Getting out of the chokehold of permanency

LAURA ELIZABETH SHEA on May 31, 2017 at 9:55 AM

“Say uncle” is a phrase cried out to admit defeat, to give in. I imagine a schoolyard bully demanding his desperate victim to scream the words in order to relieve physical pain, a kind of



faux or at least mocking mercy. To “say uncle” is to openly declare a forced and public defeat, an obvious and overwhelming one.

Back in mid-March of this year, President Trump released his fiscal year budget for 2018, which proposed a total elimination of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. This week, the Trump administration released a comprehensive budget affirming these initial cuts. Although this budget is just now beginning to face the next steps, the consequences would be, at the very least, disheartening and, at the worst, fatal for small-to-mid-sized arts and culture organizations. While the scale of such a financial setback for the arts would be drastic and widespread (according to its website, the NEA sponsors arts programming in every Congressional district), the sentiment is not new. Art and cultural entities have faced cuts before despite the ways they foster creative and critical thinking skills and help support engaged citizens. Will we finally, squeezed to the brim, have to shamefully utter “say uncle” to federal arts funding?

Say Uncle is also an experimental residency and nomadic exhibition platform based out of Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. It is an example of the kind of creative problem-solving at which artists and makers particularly thrive, not just amidst scarce-funding, but also in transitory living and working situations. It is a re-articulation of typical residency and exhibition structures for geographically isolated spaces and undetermined futures. Co-founded in 2015 by MFA Candidates Cory Imig, Dulcee Boehm and Cincinnati-based artist Benjamin Cook, Say Uncle is not grounded in a physical gallery space nor permanent residency location, but rather is an idea that utilizes DIY resources to house and fund residents and to exhibit regionally. The structure Say Uncle adopted, even before the Trump-era, acknowledges problems of making and exhibiting contemporary art in small cities and rural places. Such challenges include limited funding, low attendance, and supportive but repetitive audiences and makers. Boehm, Cook, and Imig built Say Uncle to thrive in its very temporality and geographical indeterminacy by “saying uncle” to physical exhibition space and commercial activities.



*Devin Balara. "Pavers" 2016. Produced during Say Uncle residency. Champaign-Urbana, IL. 2016. Courtesy of Say Uncle.*

Funded by a one-time award of \$2,475 from the 2016 Urbana Arts Grants Program through the City of Urbana, Say Uncle hosts invited artists to live and work in Champaign, IL for two weeks and commissions them to create temporary public artworks. The artist lives in Imig's apartment (she stays with Boehm for the two weeks) and the artist works in a donated, unused studio space at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with other MFA candidates. "Logistically, it's short enough to make it possible in our lives," Imig said in an interview. Near the end of the residency, the nomadic exhibition portion commences: Say Uncle exhibits the work locally but also partners with other spaces and galleries in Central Illinois to travel the artist's work around the region. Imig stressed, "We were really interested in a collaborative effort between the artist and the three of us, who are artists, but [who are] also organizing the project. Instead of it being this set structure, it's something that could evolve and make sense for whoever is the artist in residence."

Say Uncle developed out of a desire for connection amongst disparate art communities in Central Illinois, including Champaign-Urbana, Springfield, Bloomington-Normal, and Peoria. Boehm describes it as "giv[ing] us and other people a reason to go to the other communities where things are already happening. The project is an excuse to do that. So it is not filling a void, but connecting things that are really interesting that are already happening." Cook adds, "When you

live in a big city you can jump on a train and an hour or hour and half ride is not out of the question to do something. But it just doesn't happen here. There's something about crossing the plains or the nothingness in-between... There's a real divide between these cities that have all having these really cool art things that are happening. What Say Uncle is doing is creating a shared experience."

Say Uncle is also very much an extension of the artistic practices of Boehm, Cook, and Imig. Boehm's art practice includes performative acts of labor involving the body and the landscape, often making, she says, "political move[s] to be deliberate and say that we are engaging with these places where there's an assumption that there's not things going on. There are." Cook's research and painting practice engage with the relationships in digital and physical spaces and the crossovers that happen between these communities. And Imig, a founder of Plug Projects in Kansas City, has long been interested in connecting artists across the country and making opportunities for one another in addition to a painting and sculptural practice rooted in site-specificity.

Devin Balara was Say Uncle's first artist-in-residence in late 2016 and is an artist based in the Midwest. She created a project called *Pavers*, carved styrofoam shapes reminiscent of patio blocks, garden edgers, and stepping stones. The forms were carried around by Balara in her car, ready to be exhibited in interesting sites such as unused green space, piles of woodchips, and backstairs. "Sneakiness was a major way of operating," Balara said over email. "I found that the more confident I was in what I was doing, the more people would assumed I was just supposed to be there." Balara's untamed pavers block movement or direct vision toward looked-over or ugly spaces and they call attention to public spaces with no particular visual interest. Such effects are in opposition to architectural landscape objects' original purposes of directing eyes and bodies toward something finished and pleasant.





*Devin Balara. "Pavers" 2016. Produced during Say Uncle residency. Champaign-Urbana, IL. 2016. Courtesy of Say Uncle.*

“When I showed [Boehm, Cook, and Imig] my first few experimental images with the forms installed around town, each of them immediately began listing strange parking lots, weird rock arrangements, abandoned lots, etc. that would be great sites with check out. I feel that I collaborated with the town itself as well,” Balara said. Near the end of the residency, Balara installed the pavers at Lincoln Square Mall in Urbana, IL, the kind of ubiquitous, dated mall with several vacancies, off-beat temporary and/or seasonal stores, and no major department store left to anchor it. The pavers were exhibited along with a “garden party,” that is, with an adjacent picnic blanket and snacks for attendees. “A lot of conversations were had about what it takes to domesticate a space or make it seem habitable/okay to chill at. A blanket on the ground is suddenly a prompt for sitting where you may not normally. The pavers were operating in a similar way – acting as proposals for a way a space can function different based solely on unexpected visual cues/arrangements,” Balara said. The pavers traveled to Demo Projects in Springfield, IL, and in urban spaces of Bloomington, IL adjacent to exhibition openings.

Jeffrey Michael Austin, Say Uncle’s second artist-in-residence during the spring of 2017, is a Chicago-based artist and musician. During the residency, Austin pursued two bodies of work: the first, wall pieces that look like foggy mirrors with the illusion of words or gestures just having been

written the mirror, as if through the steam; and, the second, faux-reflective floor pieces that resemble puddles or spills, such as wine from a cup.



*Jeffrey Michael Austin. "Puddle (Clouds)" 2017. Resin, styrofoam, plastic, paint and digital print. Installation view as installed in Silvercreek Public Park in Urbana, IL during Say Uncle residency. 2017. Champaign-Urbana, IL. Courtesy of the artist.*

"I feel like where these pieces come from is a space of making something that at first glance feels very mundane, ubiquitous, unassuming, something that you walk into a space and if it weren't in an art studio, if it were 'out there' that you probably wouldn't regard it as an art object at first. But that then there is this kind of subtle magic that takes place, this extraordinary quality that you have to grapple with for a second. That feeling of, 'wait a second, what exactly is happening here?' is a feeling that I'm always trying to harness in my work," Austin explained in an interview in his Say Uncle studio.



*Jeffrey Michael Austin. "Puddle (Trees)" 2017. Resin, found objects, paint and digital print. Produced during Say Uncle residency. Champaign-Urbana, IL. 2017. Courtesy of the artist.*

Austin exhibited the spill pieces across Champaign-Urbana, at an art exhibition opening (where he placed wine spills around the museum floor much to the chagrin of the gallery guards) and on sidewalks. Portable, the works are also fixed, autonomous art objects, something Austin typically strays away from in his practice. Still, he said, "I feel like the only reason I got to these is because that resistance is still in them. They resist being regarded as art objects because they are not asking the same sorts of formal questions ... You are remaining a person in the world. You are not becoming an art viewer."



Over email, Austin reflected upon how the structure of Say Uncle fostered, even required collaboration: “Unlike most of the residencies I’ve participated in, I was the sole artist-in-residence for the two weeks with Say Uncle. This allowed for a degree of intimacy and collaboration with the Say Uncle crew that would be impossible at larger communal residencies. Additionally, the amount of direct support I received — from the studio space, to the housing, to aid in the production of work and opportunities to engage with the UIUC community — makes Say Uncle by far the most generous residency framework I’ve ever experienced.”



*Jeffrey Michael Austin. “Puddle (Clouds)”;* 2017. Resin, styrofoam, plastic, paint and digital print; Installation view as installed in Champaign Public Library during Say Uncle residency. 2017. Champaign-Urbana, IL. Courtesy of the artist.

Since the completion of the two residencies Cook has re-located from Champaign to Cincinnati, Boehm and Imig will graduate in a year, and the initial grant funds are almost out. But what is the future of Say Uncle? Is Say Uncle admitting defeat? Yes and no.

Say Uncle was not built to last, but to work with the time and resources the founders had in a particular place. In a kind of planned obsolescence, Boehm, Cook, and Imig say they are open to how Say Uncle may take different forms as they move to different cities, re-imagining its structure

for the resources and needs they have at that point in their lives. If there is a defeat, I think it is a kind of welcome one. If someone beats you up for something you are not attached to, something you are not trying to defend, why take the blows? It's not that the founders were defeated by the problems of permanent spaces, large-scale funding, gallery artists, commercial demands – they side-stepped such issues in the first place. Rather, they readily shout, "Say Uncle" to those set of art world standards, maybe in anticipation of its defeat, maybe in hope of creating more experimental, temporal, experience-based standards. Say Uncle, at its roots, is about connection, about banding together individual artists with the "make it happen" attitude of rural Midwest communities. Imig admits, that, in part, Say Uncle "is an excuse to get to know artists that I would not ever get a chance to meet. Even if there are things happening, I still wanted to do something. You can show up to things but there's a different thing when you are fully invested and participating in forming it. I wanted to figure out some way to have that experience." By rearranging the comforts of a set space, reliable funding, and a ten-year plan into a nomadic, planned chaos, and openness, Say Uncle suggests a hopeful framework of collaboration in a time of socio-political instability.

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### LAURA ELIZABETH SHEA

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