

Watson, Kate, *Colby Bird: Cold End*, [Austin Chronicle](#), July 24, 2009

Arts Review

This stark exhibit conjures a melancholy introspection rare in art about male identity

'Colby Bird: Cold End'

Okay Mountain

Okay Mountain welcomes Colby Bird, a hometown Austin boy turned budding Brooklyn art star, for his first solo exhibition in the Lone Star State. Bird's "Cold End" is an obvious fit for the Eastside gallery that often indulges an affinity for the boyish id living in all of us. Moments in this show are tinged with déjà vu – we've already seen a lot of young, male, middle-class artists obsessed with the tricky triumvirate of music, masculinity, and minimalism. Yet despite the looming danger of cliché, Bird's stark installation manages to conjure up a melancholy introspection unusual among this kind of manly milieu.

As I wandered the exhibition space alone on a recent sweltering Texas evening, I couldn't help but feel as if the artist intended for the show to be seen in just this way. A shriveled cockroach had given up and died, legs in the air, in front of Bird's homage to both street art and the sculptor of (neon) light, Dan Flavin. Cords dangled limply from the ceiling's fluorescent tribute in the middle of the room – it felt as if the heat had banished any hope of maintaining decorum. Somewhere, I imagined that Bird was lapping up the resulting quiet chaos.

The conversation expands with the hip-hop-inspired *Swagger*, a massive banner hanging precariously in the gallery's yard, drooping in all of its 28 feet of glossy promotional vinyl glory from the back fence. In this heat, it felt like the very weight of the air was causing this jaunty declaration to sag, much like the lone surviving courtyard sunflower plant clinging to life just across the yard. After the exhibition, Bird apparently plans to donate the banner to the high school he attended, whose spirited athletic colors of purple and black were co-opted for use on the piece.

According to one source, Bird went to a magnet school here in Austin, a place where he "was the nerdy white kid shipped into the black school where [he] was never quite able to fit in to the hip-hop culture." This experience has clearly informed the layers of class- and race-related commentary within the artist's work, but it is the palpable loneliness that rings truest time and again in his work. In *24/Hours*, a narrow passageway reveals a small glowing video loop playing behind a solitary obsidian aluminum chair weighted heavily with projection equipment. The edge of a hand displays a slightly tattered business card roughly embossed with the title text in script and a New York City phone number repeated in opposite corners. The loop comes slightly in and out of focus, like a pair of eyes desperately pondering whether or not to make the risky call. One is left only to imagine the breathy voice on the end of the line.

Bird is masterful at carefully feeding his audience baby-bird-sized bits of personal narrative, easily refreshing a genre that is too often afraid to tackle identity. He tenderly and purposefully challenges his audience to a sweaty, hungry, and solitary experience. Thanks to "Cold End" for leaving me hot and bothered, pondering masculinity, commerce, and decay during these endless, lifeless dog days of summer.