DENVER – Over the last 18 years, a small but loud contemporary art collection has been brewing in the Mile High City, with a mission to bring together artists’ most difficult pieces. The result is the Dikeou Collection, a diverse and ephemeral institution that’s open to the public and includes a rotating cast of special projects alongside early work from artists who went on to become internationally renowned. Devon Dikeou operates the collection as an extension of the quarterly publication Zing Magazine, of which she is the founder, editor, and publisher. The collection has been a critical part of Denver’s budding contemporary art scene.
and continues to be the most important private collection in the city.

Even though the collection is open to the public, you have to know where to look to find it. Installed on the fifth floor of the Colorado Building, the collection cascades through vintage office spaces, with room after room of large- and small-scale works by Agathe Snow, Chris Johanson, Jonathan Horowitz, Janine Gordon, Juan Gomez, and several dozen more artists. Some galleries are jam-packed with work by multiple artists, while some works are installed in spacious rooms all their own. The collection is unique in that several complete environments are installed in full, and other works threaten to disintegrate before your eyes. There is much more to see in these offices than paintings hanging on walls or sculptures on pedestals; in fact, there are only a few paintings in the collection, which leans toward the impermanent and fragile.

“Sludgie the Wale” (2007), an installation by Snow, invites visitors to the collection to walk through the imagined innards of a beached whale, a kind of contrived, post-apocalyptic amusement park attraction. Unlike the precious and conservation-first attitudes of most contemporary art institutions, the Dikeou Collection forces you to walk over and through this hulking, fragile work of fabric,
foam, string, and paint. It feels wrong, but wonderfully welcoming. Another piece, by Johannes VanDerBeek, exemplifies the ephemeral nature of the exhibition and the mission to collect difficult works: an imagined world made completely of yellowing New York Times newspapers threatens to disintegrate before your eyes, or to be blown away by your breath. One of the collection’s recent acquisitions, a self-portrait ice sculpture by Lizzi Bougatsos, literally melts away, an ironic comment on buying and collecting contemporary art, which becomes distilled to the monetization of ambiguous ideas and the right to reproduce them.

The collection includes a formative work by Wade Guyton, which he originally made for his MFA graduation show at Hunter College. Although Guyton’s inkjet paintings have since achieved astronomical prices at Christie’s and Sotheby’s, his “the Room Moved the Way Blocked (Stage #1)” (1998) broke new ground long before he made headlines. The installation commands one whole room to itself, blocking viewers’ paths and forcing them to climb up on top of the stage, thereby performing the work themselves. In contrast to the ephemeral nature of much of the work in the Dikeou Collection, Guyton’s piece feels brutal for its awkward and immovable solidity.

Unstable materials are especially prevalent throughout the selections from the collection currently on view — papier-mâché, cardboard, and pipe cleaners included. Rather than equating fragility with luxury, the pieces in the Dikeou Collection are evidence of a theoretical gesture toward art objects as residues of their conception, creation, and presentation. In other words, the collection doesn’t seem to romanticize the provenance of artworks or their unattainability, but offers insights into the beginnings of art practices and artists who gave shape to today’s contemporary art landscape.
An early work by Johanson inconspicuously occupies a small floor space in one gallery. Two small paper mâché sculptures called “Mountain Fortress” show how Johanson began to combine his graffiti practice with folk and craft aesthetics, a merging of sensibilities that went on to define the Mission School and his work to this day. An early piece by Jonathan Horowitz, from 2001, is made up of nothing but laser prints on office paper displayed in cheap gold frames. The pink pages contain lists of actors who appeared in movies that starred Julia Roberts. One page is mysteriously blank. A full-scale cardboard replica of a racecar by Chris Gilmour fills an entire gallery. The seemingly solid object would disintegrate in water. Its uselessness is its saving grace — an imitation of a luxury item that makes light of its illegitimacy.
Furthermore, the connections between the New York-based publication Zing and the collection in Colorado create a dynamic exchange of ideas, projects, and texts, which keeps the works relevant and brings Denver into a far-reaching conversation. Many artists represented in the collection, along with many who aren’t, have also submitted publication projects to Zing and a number of works are presented alongside editions of the publication, offering deeper insights into the artists’ practices and the collection.

The play between collecting art objects as an elite pursuit and contemporary art’s idealistic attempts at immateriality is key to understanding this collection. Dikeou’s mission to acquire only artists’ most difficult works results in a distinctive grouping, with unique pieces not likely to be seen in other museums or public spaces. Nowadays, work by these artists — with a few exceptions, most notably Johanson, who’s been successful within an alternative independent community — is highly institutionalized and the collection in Denver gives viewers the opportunity to interact with the work in an intimate way, which is key for encouraging critical thinking about contemporary art in new spaces and regions.
Margaret Lee, “Think About Tomorrow or Don’t” (2007), wood, watercolor, paper, dimensions variable

Misaki Kawai, “Mars Investigation Laboratory” (2006), mixed media (click to enlarge)
Paul Ramirez Jonas, "Pause and Play" (2000), mixed media installation

Chris Gilmour, "Ford" (2006), cardboard and glue, dimensions variable (click to enlarge)