

5280

A Huge Gallery on 16th Street Showcases the Magnificent Life of a Local Art Legend

Mid-Career Smear is a 30-year retrospective of the works created by Devon Dikeou, and viewers are encouraged to participate along the way.

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"TV Guides and Existential Viewing" by Devon Dikeou. Photo by Cori Anderson

Inside the Colorado Building on the 16th Street Mall is one of Denver's most extensive contemporary art havens. Started in 1998 by the Denver-born Dikeou siblings, Devon and Pany, the Dikeou Collection usually showcases artists from all over the world. For the next year, though, the fifth-floor gallery composed of many different

rooms is dedicated solely to Devon and her expansive oeuvre of work from the last 30 years, curated by Cortney Lane Stell.

Although not displayed chronologically, *Mid-Career Smear* is a representation of Devon's storied journey through the art world—as an artist, a collector, an editor and publisher of zingmagazine, a friend to other influential artists, and an art historian—all told through objects that blur the lines between art and the everyday. Even though each path that Devon has walked seems distinct, they are all so intimately intertwined that it can be hard to tell the difference. This exhibit portrays her tangled milieu as just that—tangled.

Since the year-long exhibit will eventually encompass three locations and currently fills up an entire floor of the Colorado Building with more than 60 works from different time periods, it may seem disjointed. But that's because almost all of Devon's work—mostly installations, conceptualizations, and fabrications—is made to order, and also never finished. Most of the pieces on display for *Mid-Career Smear* were originally created once Devon knew she had a venue to present them in, which means that the pieces were showcased in group shows, biennials, art fairs, and other worldwide art events she was invited to (a number that reaches over 100 at this point).

There are two themes that run consistently through Devon's work: participation and the idea of “in-betweens.” To find the in-betweens, Devon looks to everyday objects that she uses or encounters in her creative practice as both an artist and a collector—everything from Rolodexes to salt and pepper shakers to TV guides to her childhood safety blanket. The exhibition features an entire room where business cards Devon started collecting early in her career are tacked to the walls as a kind of wallpaper. In another room, 16 Rolodexes with over 5,000 contacts sit atop pedestals, in an installation called *Do I Know You?*

“I'm a really weird archivist and I like to play with the ideas of analog and digital,” Devon says. “That is a kind of in-betweenness itself.”

Other moments of in-betweenness are found throughout the show, reminding the viewer to explore their surroundings with more

curiosity. For example, in *Existential Viewing*, a slew of TV guides accompanies a rare illustrated piece by Devon. Created when she was in graduate school, this piece calls attention to the mundanity of a TV guide but repositions its importance in your mind from a piece of (recyclable) trash to a piece of Devon's puzzle. Now that she's kept years and years worth of TV guides, the collection is far more interesting than any one by itself. She's managed to find a way to aggrandize these in-betweens in our lives and distill them into pieces of contemporary art.

In some ways, it's haunting. How many storage units of collected items does Devon have? How does she know which ones will bring about that *aha* moment? Each room holds fragments of the art Devon has created or collected throughout the years, but they also, and more importantly, tell the stories of various milestones in her life.

In *Not Quite Mrs. De Menil's Liquor Closet*, the experience of Devon meeting and befriending famous contemporary artists literally surrounds the viewer. In a closet-like space, the walls from floor-to-ceiling are filled with pieces of art that were either gifted to Devon or traded for a piece of her own art. There are works by such illustrious artists as Carl Andre, Janine Antoni, Jenny Holzer, Dan Asher, Lisa Kereszi, Wade Guyton, Sarah Staton, E.V. Day, and even Mos Def.

Part of Devon's work that hasn't always been highlighted in the past—a participatory element—is also at play in this show. These participatory works are not overtly obvious. There's an uncertainty about what exactly is touchable, especially in such a contemporary art setting. In a room where aluminum ceiling tiles are placed on the floor (called *Once Upon A Time*), for instance, it almost feels sacrilegious to step on the beveled surface.

"The more dinged up it gets, the better," explains Dikeou. "At one point I was making all these artworks that were participatory but people weren't realizing they were supposed to participate."

In a room dedicated to Niney—Devon's childhood security blanket—the treasured piece of cloth rests beneath a pillow on the ground in the corner. On the wall above it hangs a photographic series showing

someone lifting the pillow to reveal the blanket. That is your cue as a viewer to do the same thing, which might go unnoticed to those who feel that art in galleries is untouchable.

In many ways, the participatory elements of Devon's work are also about the in-betweens. It's less about how you feel when you interact with it and more about the overall effect of many people interacting with it in their own ways: The aluminum floor will continue to evolve as visitors walk atop it; the Rolodex room will show new contact cards when people search through them.

The *Open Art Fax Line*—first displayed in 1992 in a show curated by Stell—might be the best example of this participatory style. A fax machine sits on the floor of the gallery and the number is given out to anyone with access to a fax machine so that random people can send pages, which are then displayed as part of the artwork. This is also why these pieces are always labeled “ongoing” after the date in which she started creating them.

This is all part of Devon's desire to eschew the strict boundaries often placed between artist, curator, collector, and viewer. Watching people figure out how to interact with a normal object that's placed on a pedestal is just as much an act of art as making a sculpture is. It's about intention and noticing the little things.

Which brings us to the part of Devon's work that feels the most unique—her ability to immortalize places and spaces where artists of all kinds talk with and interact with other artists. A cafe in Paris, TV shows, the Trump Tower, security gates that are tagged and vandalized by graffiti artists and, of course, the opening receptions of the group shows she's displayed work in. These are all represented with different rooms inside *Mid-Career Smear*, and they all represent creative gathering places that Devon has studied throughout her life.

It's about seeing the vision of the artist and the vision of the viewer at the same time, she says. Which is exactly how to summarize Devon's expansive and hard-to-describe body of work—a hybrid of what she has created and what she's witnessed, all while being enmeshed in the art world of New York, Austin, and Denver for over three decades.

Stell, the exhibition's curator, concludes: "This mix of artworks calls to attention the interrelatedness of things, softening the lines of the artist's role—with a dose of humor and absurdity on top."

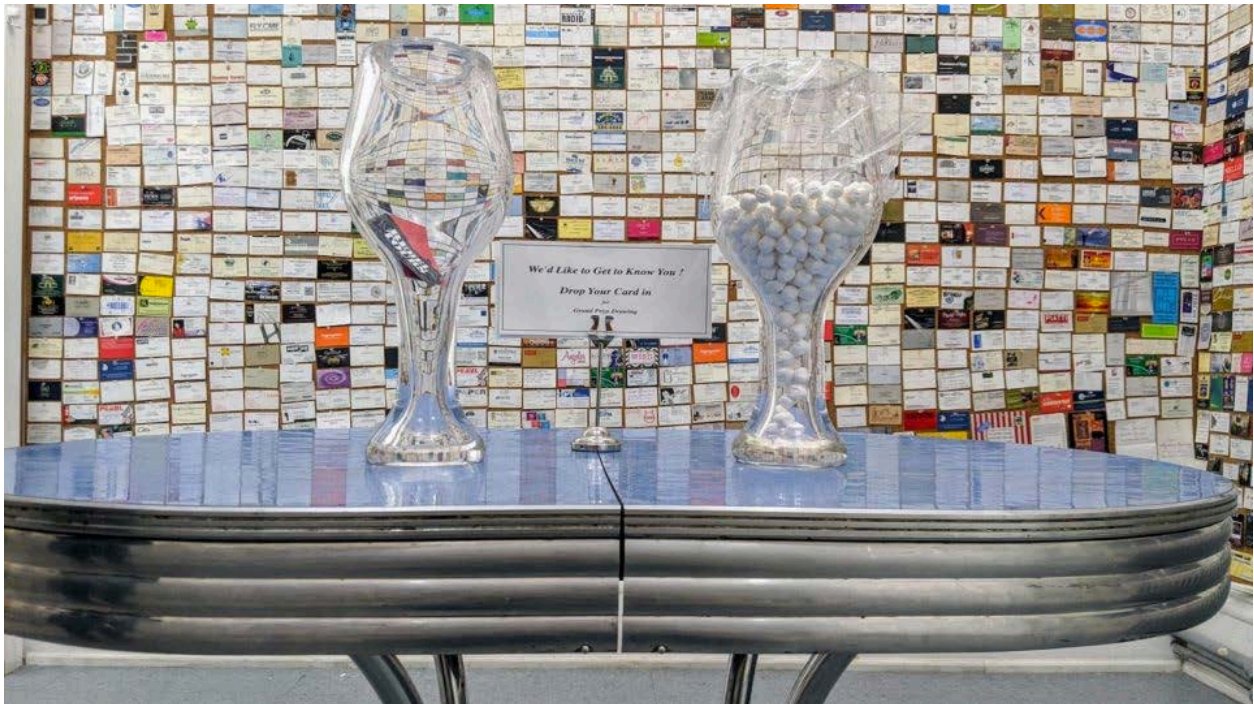
If you go: Devon Dikeou's Mid Career Smear is on view February 20, 2020, through February 18, 2021, at the Dikeou Collection, 1615 California St., fifth floor. Additional information about the exhibit and about additional programming [can be found online.](#)



Salt and pepper shakers Devon Dikeou collected and displayed at a group show called "Shake." Photo by Cori Anderson



“Do I Know You?” (1991 – ongoing) is a series by Devon Dikeou. Photo by Cori Anderson



“We'd Like to Get To Know You” is an ongoing series by Devon Dikeou. Photo by Cori Anderson