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What does it mean to be an artist? Devon Dikeou shows us in a thousand ways with “Mid-Career Smear”

Exhibit is a pile-on on top of a mass on top of a mountain of conceptual pieces

By [Ray Mark Rinaldi](#), *Special to The Denver Post* May 10, 2021, 6:00 am



Wallpaper reproduced from the powder room of the artist's mother climbs to the ceiling in a piece titled “LSD Wallpaper” by Devon Dikeou at the Dikeou Collection “Mid-Career Smear” exhibition in Denver. (Eric Lutzens, *The Denver Post*)

Devon Dikeou makes art about art. More specifically, she makes art about the experience of seeing and collecting art and the things, both physical and cognitive, that come between objects and the people who consume them.

And she is relentless about it.

She's also obsessed. Determined. Implacable. Guileless. Uncensored. There are as many adjectives to describe her drive as there are objects in the retrospective of her work, currently on display at The Dikeou Collection downtown. Which is to say, there are thousands.

Because "Mid-Career Smear," as the exhibition is titled, is a pile-on on top of a mass on top of a mountain of conceptual pieces that Dikeou has created over the course of three decades of art-making. You could spend hours parsing it out, and you should. It's a bit of a jumble — inevitable, considering the volume of ideas crammed into the gallery — but it adds up to one of the most fascinating and immersive art exhibitions you'll ever encounter.

It's a pre-tech, poor man's Meow Wolf.



A screen print by Andy Warhol featuring Mick Jagger hangs on a wall in the mirror room by Devon Dikeou at the Dikeou Collection "Mid-Career Smear" exhibition in Denver. (Eric Lutzens, The Denver Post)

There is a bit of irony in that description, considering Dikeou is nowhere close to poor herself. I don't quite know how wealthy she is, but apparently well-off enough to support her own extensive and expensive creative habits, and to have amassed considerable holdings of other contemporary artists' works, and to publish a luxe art magazine (called zingmagazine) and, yes, to have a small museum in Denver's commercial district that bears her family name and displays her personal collection.

That may sound indulgent but, in fact, it is just the opposite. Whatever Dikeou has she returns tenfold to the world through her practice, which combines all of the

above. The making, the collecting, the showing — she links it together and offers it to the public at no charge. It's a quirky blend of art, philanthropy and extravagance that is probably only fully understood by seeing "Mid-Career Smear."

Curator Cortney Lane Stell has organized the exhibition thematically, rather than chronologically, which makes navigating its various concepts as logical as possible. Still, it is rigorous.

Wisely, the show opens with a piece that sets the tone for what is to come. "Pay What You Wish But You Must Pay Something" is an assemblage of re-created donation boxes from museums and galleries across the country. Dikeou borrowed the boxes from the museums, had them fabricated in their exact dimensions, and then returned them.

There are 18 in all, mostly clear lucite boxes bearing the logos of their respective institutions, ranging from The Bass art museum in Miami to the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. Visitors to the Dikeou can drop money into them if they choose, and the funds are forwarded to the museums.

It's more of an illustrative exercise, of course, than an actual fundraising scheme — no one wants or expects you to give. But by pulling the boxes from their original context and placing them together in an exhibition, Dikeou highlights a key moment where the romance of art consumption crashes into the reality of our need to pay for it, even when it appears to be free. Viewing art is enchanting, but it's also transactional. These boxes, and the awkward moments they create, are always there to remind us.

There are other points of connection that Dikeou explores. The signs that advertise exhibitions, the newspapers and magazines that alert people to their existence or quality, the opening events that generate excitement, the networking that must be done between artists and gallerists, the actual doors that allow people to enter a space or keep them out. Dikeou defines art broadly — anything put on display is art, really — and there are pieces in this show that delve into the many aspects of access and consumption.

One piece, "Rikers," consists of three large key rings, filled with found keys that are no longer associated with actual door locks. Another, "Do I Know You?," features 16 of the artist's personal rolodexes, each set up on its own pedestal, going back to 1991 when she first started making her way meaningfully into the art world. Yet another, "TV Diary," is a messy pile of TV Guide magazines that the artist has been subscribing to and saving for 30-plus years. Like many of the pieces in the show, it is ongoing.

Dikeou also blurs the line between fine art and real life, sometimes to extremes. The series "Please" consists of photographs taken of actual flower arrangements

that were re-created from the last 16 paintings that Édouard Manet completed before he died.



17th Century Monk chairs surrounded by prints of chairs by Devon Dikeou at the Dikeou Collection “Mid-Career Smear” exhibition in Denver. (Eric Lutzens, The Denver Post)

There’s a room full of velvet-covered chairs that Dikeou had re-created from their appearance in paintings of popes by such artists as Caravaggio, Velazquez and Raphael. They are actual, realized, full-size chairs, and visitors can sit in them.

Interactivity is one key to the success of “Mid-Career Smear,” bringing a show that might otherwise feel dated to some (there are pieces that use now-antiquated phone books and a working fax machine) in line with the present trend of letting guests touch, push, pull and poke as part of their museum experience. “Immersive art” is all the rage these days.

Visitors to the Dikeou can write their names on cards and clock in on a vintage punch-clock system. They can jump up and down on one of those dingy air hoses that cars used to run over as they entered gas stations. They can write postcards, take home stickers and drink from a water cooler that is part of an installation. There’s a playlist of pop songs they can access from their phones.

It's an amusement park of art that does not lack for humorous moments. One object in the show, "For Customers' Use Only," consists of two bathroom keys, one labeled "Women" and the other "Men." Anyone who takes advantage and heads off to do their business will soon learn the museum has just one restroom and it is available to any gender.

"Mid-Career Smear" has multiple personalities. Some of its contents are deadly serious; others are absurd. While its larger themes are easy to relate to, some of the more personal works — there's a series connected to the artist's childhood security blanket — require some patience to appreciate. Still, they are necessary elements to the exhibition because it is, after all, a retrospective of works by one single artist and we need to get to know her intimately, at least in ways that matter, to understand her motivation.

That motivation does become clear by the end of "Mid-Career Smear," and it is wholly satisfying. The works can be enigmatic, but the show is presented so well, and so adventurously, that it gets visitors past the innate and unavoidable barrier that exists between these particular objects and the people who consume them: the fact that an artist is presenting a retrospective of herself.

What might have seemed eccentric at first turns out to be critical. Rather than showing off, Dikeou is self-sacrificing. Understanding her amazing and unique practice — all of it; the making, buying and showing combined — requires everything to be exposed and inhaled all at once.

Most important, though, it is about more than herself. "Mid-Career Smear" shows us what it means to be an artist, to hand over an entire life to art and to put yourself out there no matter what people might think. To be relentless and guileless is difficult enough. To be brave like this is heroic.