



EMILIE HALPERN
HOUSTON

In the middle of a timeworn shotgun house a stack of five hundred and forty sheets of letter-size paper sits flush on a pedestal. The hip-high column is white, save for a lone mark: a Xeroxed pair of lips in the center of the top sheet. Taking a sheet away, as the checklist invites, reveals more—and less—of the same. Each is a lighter copy; the last barely a gray smear. Emilie Halpern's *Lost Weekend*, 2009, turns generosity into entropy, but the transformation is positive: paper becomes page, and the work a slowly animated kiss.

A similarly delicate touch and buoyant melancholy abound in *Zvezda*, Halpern's ample, site-sensitive installation of eight new works and one old favorite at *para/site*, galeria perdida's temporary exhibition space, at Project Row Houses [May 2—24, 2009]. *Interstellar*, 2006, a sparkly, fuzzy three-dimensional starburst form, clings to the middle of a wall. However, some of the dark gray "cosmic dust" escapes the pull of a hidden magnet and falls to the floor. Across the room, *Kármán Line*, 2009, finds a helium-filled weather balloon tied to a large spool of black thread. Trapped in a ceiling corner, the balloon is unable to reach its namesake—the boundary of earth's atmosphere—let alone the limits of its tether. A later visit reveals it grounded, deflated, deformed, and, freed of its fetter, rolling in the breeze. In *Mate for Life*, 2009, the end of a macaw feather barely touches a wall, extending an eye-level scarlet streak parallel to the floor.

Simple but evocative, Halpern's sculptures play like magic tricks in reverse. Obvious in their construction, each slowly provokes wonder, occluding easy physics with emotional resonance. In her practice Halpern regularly represents the most uncanny and romantic of phenomena—lightening, the cosmos, love—by modest, almost pragmatic means. Close-quarters photography and minimal reworkings of vernacular materials make for personal encounters—the sublime made intimate, if not sentimental. Here, she quotes local space science to surprisingly heartfelt effect.

Apollo, 2009, an unfolded space blanket, hangs two

feet off the floor and away from a parallel wall. A halogen bulb shines a pinpoint glow on the foil's inner silver side, through to its outer golden grid of folds and crinkles. Any heat gleaned readily dissipates, and the rectangle billows like a flimsy patch of cooling sun. Meanwhile, in *Zvezda*, 2009, the title—Russian for star—is scribbled bold and backwards in zero gravity ink on a sheet of paper, which is attached to the ceiling near the house's front window. The paper is reflected in a mirror plate on the floor below, opening up the illusion of a deep recess and therein, the now legible word fallen below.

This separation, or doubling, echoes the mood that traverses the exhibition—gaps, loss, and desired connections. *Starfish*, 2009, a second photocopy work, places two removable stacks of paper side-by-side on a low, form-fitting plinth. A story of a starfish splitting in two, printed half on each stack, is further split by the dividing seam. The exhibition's only photograph, the framed *sunrisesunset*, 2009, imparts an oceanside sunset reflected over a bisecting x-axis. Two opposing suns approach—or depart—a shared horizon in red, orange, and blue hues matching the macaw feather.

There is another story to all of this, a range of references that includes antipodes, the Russian space program, and Dostoyevsky—and the Xeroxed lips, it turns out, are John Lennon's. Whereas such specific subtext might normally provide conceptual ballast for Halpern's poetics, they feel ancillary or unnecessary here—that is, inspirational but lost threads. Instead, the immediate context—the final exhibition of *para/site*, a program of small gestures, and the host Project Row Houses, where aspiration regularly tangles with reality—offers enough narrative cohesion to back the scattered charm of individual works. A final offering, *Omsk*, 2009, a wristwatch folded on a windowsill, keeps local time and that of Omsk, Russia, twelve hours away. Seemingly left during installation, the timepiece reads even more poignantly as a forgotten beginning, or a reminder of inevitable change.

—Kurt Mueller