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Too many gimmicks in Triennial

Jacob Stockinger — 7/06/2007 8:35 am

Is it worth seeing this year's [Wisconsin Triennial](#) show at the [Madison Museum of Contemporary Art](#)?

Well, you've only got until July 15 to take it in and judge for yourself.

But it really shouldn't take too long, at least not if you're in search of the really good stuff.

The statewide arts survey is held every three years, and to be honest, this one just feels too mediocre and goofy - defenders would say "playful" - compared to other years.

Some of that, of course, is due to the artworks themselves, which were culled from 493 applicants who were pared down to 43.

Some tried-and-true artists of past triennials have gone on to other, and often less convincing, things. Milwaukee photographer Stephen Foster, for example, has abandoned his wonderful small 3x3-inch black-and-white, minimalist "studies" of the ordinary world, made in a wet dark room, for larger color digital images that are repetitive and gimmicky visual reinterpretations of the music of Morton Feldman.

Even J. Shimon and J. Lindemann, two of my all-time favorites, have gone from their entrancing single-subject, black-and-white large-format portraits to series portraits and color portraits that have less impact, to my eyes, although their work is still impressive.

But just as important as the role of the artists and art is the feel of the curators' heavy hands behind the selection.

Too much of the work is simply too big. Large scale may fit MMoCA's new space, but bigger isn't always better and often seems an attempt to make up for weak substance. Just look at Nicholas Lampert's huge Styrofoam plucked chicken or Stephan Rea's lumberyard tank.

There's also a cartoon quality to much of the art, perhaps exemplified in the paintings of UW Professor T.J. Solien, whose work reinterprets Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" and a modern "sequel" about his wife. Or the bright-colored lawn ornament deer with tall aluminum antlers in powerlines by Gail Simpson and Aristotle Georgiades.

Then there is the butch-femme chinoiserie of the blue-and-white painted chainsaw and drill by William Anderson. And the "living" sculpture and upholstery of Stephanie Limer. And the gaudy installation of Santiago Cucullu and Gary John Gresl's assemblage of lumped-together junk from a North Woods cabin. Or Jennifer Angus' thousands of mammoth bugs pinned on a wall. Or Kathryn E. Martin's "Plane on Plane," which features 5,280 paper airplane tails installed on a wall.

Too much of the art in this show just seems too gimmicky and too much of a reach. It falls into the modernist trap of being impressed by its own cleverness.

You can often tell these things by the length of the wall panels.

Here's Jake's Rule: The longer the text panel, the less the art has to say by itself.

So when the wall caption says this work interrogates that, and that work interrogates this, you know you're dealing with philosophy more than art, with speculation more than the hard facts of beauty, with the curator's world more than the artist's.

Lots of this art may be hip, very self-consciously hip. But, at least to me, it's not very convincing. Too much of it just doesn't connect. Next time, maybe the MMoCA curators should take along an outside or unprofessional set of eyes.

Still, there are some good or even excellent works to be seen in this show.

Here is my list for the Jakes: The gold medal goes to Bob Erickson, whose oil paintings on paper and panels, inspired by rocks, land and peat in Ireland, speak abstractly to the viewer with a certain suggestive sensuality and metaphorical mystery.

The silver medal goes to photographer Sonja Thomsen's three panels of water, waves and sand, a haunting illustration of abstraction found in the real world. (Photography has always been a strong suit of MMoCA.)

The bronze medal is shared by Amy Ruffo's large-scale black-and-white drawings, quietly elegant in their simplicity and repetitiveness, and UW Professor Jack Damer's mixed media triptych "Night Vision" about the Iraq war.

Honorable mentions go to: Middleton photographer Stephen Milanowski's well composed industrial photos; Karen Gunderman's ceramic "Bone Garden"; Xiaohong Zhang's intricate paper cutout of lovers and a pregnant woman; Tom Jones' deadpan photographic explorations of how American Indians are exploited for tourism; and Carl Corey's moody night photos of highways and motel swimming pools.

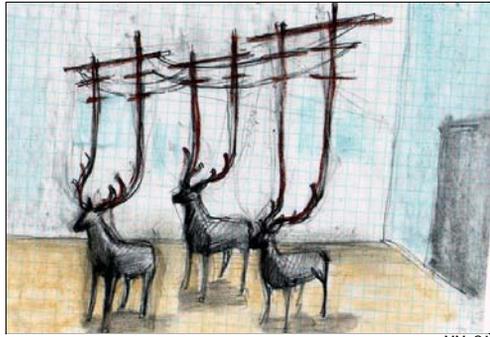
A couple of the installations also have their moments, though you have to be patient. Try especially Toby Kaufmann-Buhler's "Echo Tense."

Overall, I suspect, most people will think better art exists out there in the state than this show suggests.

One hopes they're right.

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MMoCA

By Gail Simpson and Aristotle Georgiades

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