

ART

Rooms with a view

The Wisconsin Triennial benefits from the new MMoCA

Jennifer A. Smith on Thursday 05/24/2007

Ahhhh. That sound you hear is the Wisconsin Triennial finally getting to breathe, installed for the first time in a space that was actually designed as an art museum.

The 2007 Triennial makes the most of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art's expansive new space in the Overture Center, using not only the State Street, main and new media galleries, but also the lobby, a corridor and the rooftop sculpture garden. MMoCA finally has the kind of space it needs to display its signature showcase of contemporary Wisconsin art to full effect.

But what about the art? Even a great space cannot salvage poor-quality art. Thankfully, the 2007 Triennial — the first in five years, not three, due to the disruptions of Overture Center construction — is a strong and varied exhibition. More film and video have been included compared to previous Triennials, and many younger artists (born in the '60s and '70s) have been selected. While a number of artists tackle social and political issues, they do so in ways that are intriguing, not heavy-handed.

The pieces in the State Street gallery, which many visitors will encounter first, would make a fine mini-exhibition of their own. Stephanie Liner's compelling, well-constructed hybrid of furniture and fashion, "Gibbosity," greets passers-by on the street through the plate-glass window. The two pieces making up "Gibbosity" are a strange sort of muff worn over the bust and a dress with an enormous bustle supported by furniture legs.

Worn by live models for the Triennial's opening, the pieces caused a stir both inside and outside the museum. Models will again wear "Gibbosity" during the museum's First Fridays events on June 1 and July 6. The word "gibbosity" means a swelling or protuberance, and Liner's work comments on the sexual connotations of clothing — but even without those undercurrents, it's a witty visual mash-up of furniture and fashion.

Nearby is another sort of visual punning, William J. Andersen's multi-part "Mierwaqi," based on the Milwaukee Electric Tool Corporation, which once manufactured its wares in Wisconsin but has since moved most of its production to China. Borrowing the jagged style of the tool company's logo, Andersen has placed the word "Mierwaqi" on the gallery wall in a Chinoiserie-style wallpaper pattern. Below it, some drills and a chainsaw are displayed on a Chinese table. The tools have been painted in the blue-and-white patterning of Asian ceramics. Andersen's work has the jolt of a visual pun, but it's also a serious comment on globalization and what that means for workers in different parts of the world.

Also in the State Street gallery are works by Xiaohong Zhang, a UW-Whitewater professor who creates large-scale paper cuttings in a northern Chinese style. Zhang's subjects here are intimate human relationships, such as in "Pregnancy, WI," which shows the silhouette of a pregnant woman and the fetus inside her. What makes Zhang's cut-out interesting are the abstracted forms inside the woman's body that create a network of leaves, birds and insects, suggesting that the woman's pregnancy is a sort of natural, primordial communion with her child.

Upstairs, just before entering the museum's sprawling main gallery, viewers can check out film and video offerings in a dedicated new media gallery — a welcome thing since its sounds don't interfere with the rest of the museum, as is sometimes the case in other venues. A nifty touch-screen panel lets viewers select what they wish, rather than being subjected to an endless loop. **A few of the videos are evocations of far-away places, such as Toby Kaufmann-Buhler's juxtaposition of hectic scenes of the London tube with dreamy nature footage**, and Erik Gunneson's video diary of a month in Sweden.

In the main gallery, viewers are immediately greeted by Jennifer Angus' site-specific installation composed mainly of insect specimens (see sidebar). "The Grammar of Ornament" runs floor to ceiling and plays on both Victorian patterning and also the tradition of forming pictures out of insects. Taking a line from Toni Morrison, pinned bugs spell out "Birth, life, and death — each took place on the hidden side of a leaf," a disarmingly moving sentiment about the microcosms all around us that we rarely take note of.

Other highlights from the main gallery include Fred Stonehouse's witty "Selections from the Natural History Portfolio of Marshall Deerfield, c. 1850-2007," in which the artist concocts all manner of strange creatures documented by an imaginary 19th-century observer in Wisconsin. Oddities such as the "marsh goat," "tree cat" and "creek devil" are rendered in Stonehouse's eerie, faux-naïve style. Stonehouse cleverly works humor and narrative into his art.

Gary John Gresl also plays off folklore and Wisconsin mythologies. "Upon Return from the Cabin" uses the materials of kitsch to create objects that are decidedly more than kitsch. Taking an old Zenith TV set, antlers, a skull, pine cones, shells, fish heads, broken china and more, Gresl's work has a playfulness that is skillfully undercut with something more serious and hard to define — perhaps a nostalgia for a fabled past that never really was.

Of course, some works in the Triennial are more successful than others. Mark Klassen's "Project Payphone" allows gallery visitors to dial selected numbers ranging from a Pennsylvania prison to the Whitney Museum of American Art, presumably setting up unexpected conversations. The effect is a little gimmicky — and besides, newer technologies have already facilitated farther-flung connections between people.

Laurie Beth Clark's two-screen video work, "Veracity," presents six boomer-age women telling stories about their lives, such as work or coping with ill parents. While one presumes the desired effect is a layering of voices, suggesting the commonality of certain experiences faced by women of the same generation, the format detracts from the subject matter. It's actually a bit annoying, trying to mentally block out one voice in order to focus on another. It's as if the artist doesn't trust that these women's stories, individually, will hold our attention. I'm sure that's not her intention, but the result is disappointing.

The exhibition is also light on certain mediums such as textiles and ceramics, but that may well be a function of who applied to this year's exhibition.

All told, there are plenty of delights in the 2007 Triennial. From Daniel O'Neal's exquisitely rendered realist paintings, to the lonely, bleak spaces captured in the photographs of Carl Corey, to Sara Schneckcloth's large-scale, mixed-media work of what she dubs "imagined microbiological systems," there is, as always, plenty in the Triennial to please viewers of differing tastes. The exhibition testifies to the health of Wisconsin's visual art community.

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