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Collective vision

Triennial is meditative and witty in its exploration of life's disconnects

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Madison - Very little of the art, if any, in the Wisconsin Triennial at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art appears to be there purely for its beauty.

Advertisement

10TH ANNUAL

Ziegler Kettle Moraine Jazz Festival

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Virtually all of it is driven by ideas that serve, on the whole, as a collective lament about the disconnects created by a rapidly changing world.

The more than 125 works on view, including painting, installation, sculpture, photography, video, assemblage and a number of site-specific pieces made just for the show, represent one of the most - if not the most - thorough and compelling portraits of art making in Wisconsin presented to date.

Though the tradition of a statewide survey of Wisconsin art is far from new, this triennial is unprecedented in its size and ambition, in large part because of the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art's new and greatly expanded space at the Overture Center.

Of the 43 artists and three collaborative teams selected from a field of nearly 500, many were born or educated here, while others are from as far away as China and Korea and have made Wisconsin their home.

Many are familiar faces, but some were new names. Twenty-seven had never been included in a prior triennial.

One benefit of a survey of this size is the ability to examine the affinities among artists, the threads of ideas and approaches that seem connected in some way.

Power in repetition

Several artists used meticulous and even tedious replicating gestures in their work. Some are exploring the ways that ideas, stories and things are reproduced and mediated in contemporary culture, often getting at issues of authenticity.

Roy Staab, for instance, used reed after reed to create elegant bunches for his seemingly natural but gravity-defying installation on the museum's rooftop garden. Mat Rappaport used endless visual looping of escalators, highways and subways in his video piece. Jason Yi painstakingly applied one packing peanut after another to create a wall sculpture of a mythical Korean mountain.

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Artist kathryn e. martin folded more than 5,000 paper airplanes, repeating the same method again and again, which became meditative, like the repetitive fingering of prayer beads. In the gallery, she applied the planes' protruding noses to a single wall. In such number, the innocent childhood toys were transformed into something minimalist and stunningly textural. That these objects point at us forcefully and appear to be puncturing the building also has a poignancy in a post-Sept. 11 world.

Kyoung Ae Cho's work is an act of devotion to the orderliness and simple beauty found in the organic material that most us overlook. She commingles the language she finds in things like sloughed-off leaves with her own artistic language of repeating lines and forms. For "100 Sage Flavored Cubes" she covered 100 wood blocks with sage and set them out onto the gallery floor. Slightly smaller than Kleenex boxes, these squares draw our attention to the subtle texture - and smell - of sage as well as the lines made by the cast shadows.

A sense of remove

Steven D. Foster's exquisite, abstract photographs are visual meditations that transfigure everyday bits of reality - like a garage door or a woman's back - by replicating, slicing, reassembling and subtly manipulating them.

Though austere and minimalist, Foster's work creates unexpected and complex tensions between flatness and depth and between almost imperceptible shifts in tone. At any given glance, lines and forms can appear to recede, emerge, sit flat, bend or vibrate like an instrument string.

In another form of reproduction, Laurie Beth Clark asked actors to re-enact interviews she had with women - a psychotherapist, an artist and a lawyer - whose professions deal with truth. Listening to the real words of real women re-enacted in the video installation leaves us with the sure and intuitive knowledge that something is subtly false.

Beth Lipman creates a beautiful sense of cool remove in her works, which are reproductions of reproductions - sort of.

She recasts Renaissance and Baroque still-life paintings into glass and then photographs the glass pieces. They are drained of all color and locked inside an image that is even one more step removed from the touch.

Still lifes often served as metaphors, with things such as ripe fruits signifying the fragility and preciousness of life. By using glass, which is both resilient and fragile, in a different way, Lipman refashions the iconography in a modern way with modern materials.

Other artists seemed to address issues of time and the experience of its rapid passing.

One of the most visually beautiful pieces in the show, by an artist I'd never heard of, was "Echo Tense," a video piece by Toby Kaufmann-Buhler in collaboration with composer Benjamin Wallfisch. In it, Kaufmann-Buhler seizes split seconds of time, snippets of subways emptying of people or a cropped image of a pond rippling and reflecting trees. By playing these minute loops over and over, he makes urban settings shake like a salt shaker and makes nature vibrate like a tuning fork.

Photographers and video artists in particular suspended everyday moments for our consideration. Carl Corey's photographs, for example, document iconic American places that are taken for granted - car washes, hotel swimming pools, highways. They are comforting images, places we know, but also eerie and remote, presented with a sense of romance and nostalgia that suggests they are already past.

Sardonic storybooks

Dealing with time in a different way, some artist recalled the language and imagery of childhood, not unlike martin's previously mentioned paper planes.

Some of the ugliest injuries humans inflict upon each other can happen within the secret domain of marriage, where a deep knowing can in fact be a weapon. That harsh, subjective reality is effectively explored in the fantasy, "Babes in Toyland"-like world of T. L. Solien's paintings.

In them, the colors are beautiful and figures are playthings. In "Sap," a doll-like girl stands with rosy cheeks, wide eyes and a giant club, hovering over a thin, stick-figure-like man sleeping in a worn and dirty bed. The characters exist in space that feels a bit folded in and are surrounded with gestural, downward drips of paint and cartoonish pieces of rotting fruit.

Similarly, Jennifer San Martin's cartoon-influenced video, "Little Green Apples," features animated smokestacks and scissors playfully bouncing and twirling to a carefree tune while slicing and smoking up all that's around them. Menacing lyrics punctuate the point: "And there's no such thing as Dr. Seuss or Disneyland and Mother Goose, no nursery rhymes."

Standing in front of Jennifer Angus' tall, giant wall of dead insects, arranged in lyrical, repeating patterns, is like shrinking in size and being immersed into an "Alice in Wonderland"-like world. Graphic images of creatures and plants fill the wall, too.

The strange and storybook-like feel is charming, similar in tone to the videos of Cecelia Condit, whose work is also in the show.

What taps into a vulnerable spot in the psyche, though, the emotions about death and extinction, is what we see on closer inspection - the pincers, thorny limbs and stingers that these bugs used to survive and wound. We also see that despite that armor, they ended up pinned down and manipulated like specimens for inspection and categorization.

Crafty, in a good way

A very refined and precise use of craft, which often doesn't go hand in hand with the kind of conceptual work in this exhibit, permeated the work. Many works are made with an attentiveness that seems at odds with the pace of contemporary life, too, referring to the passing of time in yet another manifestation.

Stephanie Liner's "Gibbosity," what she calls a living sculpture and upholstery piece, reflects on the objectification of women. The two beautifully tailored dresses have well-crafted furniture-like protrusions at either the bust or back side. They are sometimes worn by living models, sometimes by mannequins, and stand in what used to be a department store window at the museum.

Also falling into this category would be Doug Holst, who created a colorful, geometric wall painting at the museum of MMoCA with a highly systematic approach, and Amy Ruffo, who creates large-scale, horizontal drawings with innumerable feathery loops of black ink on pale paper.

Thinking, not preaching

We are given greater access into artists' thinking in this triennial, because of a great strength of the show - room to show a selection of pieces for each artist, as opposed to the one or two that space previously allowed.

This alone, coupled with the museum's increasing profile, attracted a higher caliber of candidates, according to the curators, who traveled more than 2,000 miles to visit the studios of 90 finalists all over the state.

Sometimes meditative, sometimes witty, almost never heavy-handed and often disturbing, the diverse artworks in this show feel like an antidote to the very forces the exhibit stands to reprove - the onslaught of information, technological advances, consumerism, human development and changing global realities.

For a show that takes on political and social critique, little of it has an ax to grind. What I perhaps appreciate the most about this collection of works is the way many of the artists explore the inexplicable in a daring and thoughtful way without forcing their conclusions - or ours.

Wisconsin Triennial

Review



Stephanie Liner's "Gibbosity" is a sculpture-and-upholstery piece that reflects on the objectification of women.

Multimedia



Art City takes a closer look at some of the art in the Wisconsin Triennial, and offers a view of some of the video works in the show.

WATCH VIDEO



"Echo Tense" is a video piece that addresses time, by Toby Kaufmann-Buhler in collaboration with composer Benjamin Wallfisch.



Photographer Jessica Jacobs uses constructed spaces to create a sense of adventure and exploration.



T. L. Solien's large-scale paintings join personal narratives with literary references.

If You Go

The Wisconsin Triennial is on view at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, 227 State St., Madison, through July 15. Information: (608) 257-0158; www.mmoca.org.

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