

ART; ART REVIEW; It's a trek worth exploring; The California Biennial drifts into mediocrity, but some works are engaging.

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ABSTRACT

Anticipation because any sizable survey of recent contemporary art assembled by a museum curator with an eye (plus an ear to the ground) will include at least some unexpected surprises. Ready-made objects were rented from Hollywood prop-houses – top hat, dog-shaped cookie jar, clocks, Egyptian Hours – and isolated on pedestals like Brancusi sculptures or, for the Horus, between two mirrors that reflect and cleave a blue tarp into a parting sea.

FULL TEXT

Biennial. These days the word generates conflicting responses of anticipation and dread.

Anticipation because any sizable survey of recent contemporary art assembled by a museum curator with an eye (plus an ear to the ground) will include at least some unexpected surprises. Juxtaposed with sure things – artists who, for one reason or another, drew unusual recent notice – the biennial mixture can be lively and enlightening.

And dread because – aside from the inevitable inclusion of mediocrities or worse – there's always the possibility for big, unsustainable claims about so-called trends, which rarely fit into calendar-driven packages. Depending on the survey's geographical territory, a biennial can easily stray into myopia. And walking in the door, anyone who follows art already has a handy mental list of "clearly" better artists who would have been better to include to make a better show.

Orange County Museum of Art curator Sarah C. Bancroft is well aware of the duality. Her current California Biennial's catalog introduction, due to be published later this month, makes that plain. The particular fusion of anticipation plus dread is pretty much why biennials have the general reputation of being shows you love to hate.

For artists, smart satire is one way to respond. Finishing School, a collective of five artists who have worked together since 2001, takes the international proliferation of biennial shows as a starting point. Inside OCMA they've set up a makeshift film studio, complete with green screen, for an ambiguous, audience-participation production titled "54" – as in Studio 54, one presumes – which will relocate to Italy in June to shoot more scenes at the Venice Biennale.

Feel free to sign up for an improvisational part in their Warhol-style soap opera. (If James Franco can do it on "General Hospital," why not you at OCMA?) In a celebrity-driven society and an art school-driven museum scene, no need to go to Switzerland for training in the established etiquette of cultural and social activities. Biennials are the art world's new finishing school.

Which is not to say that trivia reigns. Riffing on Arizona's notorious recent law, SB 1070, Camilo Ontiveros used his

OCMA invitation to propose that the museum use "reasonable suspicion" of alien status to allow free admission to the show to visitors who fit the profile.

The artist-museum dialogue on the proposal is recorded in a wall text. After due deliberation OCMA deftly declined, citing California's landmark 1959 Unruh Civil Rights Act broadly outlawing discrimination in public accommodations. The museum threw into high-relief the intentional absurdity of Ontiveros' piece -- not to mention Arizona's retrograde politics -- for an outcome that is oddly affirming for the artist, the institution and a viewer.

The 45 artists and collectives in the biennial are mostly younger (just nine are older than 40) and few are well established. That enhances a sense of discovery.

One example is Wu Tsang, whose projected video "Damelo Todo" -- "Give Me Everything" -- interweaves unexpected subjects in unforeseen ways. Largely shot at a gritty MacArthur Park nightclub, varied immigrants and transgendered revelers, who are only sometimes likely to be the same person, emerge as sharing a startlingly similar status as aliens living in a strange land. Wu celebrates that status for its antic wonder.

Another is Luke Butler. A suite of six modest-size paintings of scenes plucked from "Star Trek" could have been wince-inducing. But Butler, who isolates characters and bits of landscape against flat fields of color, approaches the popular cult show like a Pre-Raphaelite consecrating mythic national literature or Benjamin West painting "The Death of General Wolfe" in 1770.

Three paintings show dead heroes. Two have Capt. Kirk shielding his eyes from an unseen horror. One arrests Spock in mid-dissolve, beaming up or down. Together they transform the subjects into a peculiar breed of history painting, albeit each roughly the size of a TV screen.

A third is Alex Israel, who manages to wring yet one more drop from the Dada-dishrag that is now Marcel Duchamp. Ready-made objects were rented from Hollywood prop-houses -- top hat, dog-shaped cookie jar, clocks, Egyptian Horus -- and isolated on pedestals like Brancusi sculptures or, for the Horus, between two mirrors that reflect and cleave a blue tarp into a parting sea.

Knowing that the props will return to storage when the show is over turns Israel's temporary installation-narrative into something approaching an actual 3-D "movie." Given the objects' ordinariness, a salutary sense of estrangement slowly descends on all the other objects one encounters after leaving his installation.

The biennial format, which encourages grazing among disparate aesthetic forms, bouncing from one to the next, can make some work difficult to engage. Wu's documentary and Stanya Kahn's brash video of a wounded but plucky disaster victim adrift in the modern landscape are, at 20 and 35 minutes, respectively, a different breed from Violet Hopkins' tiny, exquisite, colored pencil drawings of eruptions or John Zurier's big, atmospheric abstract paintings, in which a surface abrasion on pale color functions as discreet interior drawing. Time-based videos require handing over attention to the artist's schedule in a way that paintings don't.

And sculptures -- at least in the form of stand-alone objects of the sort so successfully and abundantly chronicled by the 2005 exhibition, "Thing," at the UCLA Hammer Museum -- are almost nonexistent here. An expression of curatorial disinterest, in favor of the now hoary format of installation art?

The show has a lot of neo-art -- that is, neo-Ed Ruscha, neo-Monique Prieto, neo-Center for Land Use Interpretation, neo-Nam June Paik, neo-Judy Fiskin, even neo-Josef Albers -- all by other artists. In most instances these works

are attempting to draw out something new, but the practitioners aren't yet free of their artistic sources' gravitational pull.

Still, the show, on view to March 13, has a lot to offer -- Katy Grannan's reinvigoration of pedestrian street photography; Brian Dick's performances with pinatas cum professional sports-style mascots acting up at art events; Alexandra Grant's poetic, inside-out word drawings; Carlee Fernandez's disassembled taxidermy self-portrait; Drew Heitzler's narrative mapping of Orange County through tracks perceived among people (tech Chief Executive Ellen Hancock, historical real estate lawyer George Hugh Smith, tract home builder Bruce Karatz), places (Newport Beach, Orange, Irvine) and things (Central Pacific Railroad, wildfires, Boeing Co.); and more.

I was engaged by about a third of the works on view. Altogether that might not sound like a lot. For a biennial, however, it's actually quite good.

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California Biennial 2010

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When: Through March 13

Admission: \$12

Contact: (949) 759-1122, www.ocma.net

Credit: ART CRITIC

Illustration

Caption: PHOTO: HE'S DEAD, JIM: In Luke Butler's "Landing Party II," a red-shirted crewman gets what he's due.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Orange County Museum of Art; PHOTO: FLEETING GLIMPSE: Alex Israel uses ready-made objects rented from Hollywood prop-houses -- a top hat, a cookie jar -- propped on pedestals.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Orange County Museum of Art; PHOTO: PINATA: Using recycled cardboard, newspaper, tissue paper and staples, Brian Dick creates a mascot.; PHOTOGRAPHER:Orange County Museum of Art

DETAILS

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