

# phoenix biennial

## The art is Southwest, the concepts New York

By JOSEPH YOUNG

**T**he 1987 Phoenix Biennial exhibition differs from those held in the past in that Colorado and Utah artists are no longer represented. Instead, we find works of art created in Texas and California. According to Bruce D. Kurtz, Curator of 20th Century Art, "The Museum staff felt that representing these two important states of our region would significantly enhance the Phoenix Biennial."

Certainly there is much to criticize about individual works in the show, the poorly written but still informative catalogue and even the qualitatively uneven exhibition itself. Nevertheless, of nearly seventy works on view there are nine that are first rate including: John Baldessari's *Watched Suppliant*, a hand-colored, two-part enlargement of old movie still photographs; David Bates' *Purple Galinule*, a large stylized landscape of a swamp and birds; Dan Collins' *Virtual America III*, a minimal-looking green sculpture surmounted by a video camera which records the "damaged" surface of the sculpture and transmits this view to a tiny video screen where the camera view becomes a map of the United States; Hoge Day's elegant mixed-media abstractions made from discarded construction materials; Jill Giegerich's untitled painting portraying a mechanical-looking turquoise female torso; Allan Graham's *Gates*, which bridges the gap between painting and sculpture; Raul Guerrero's painting *Shadows* which incorporates three dimensional birds and a real cuckoo clock; Jim Wald's *Sea Anis*, an acrylic on canvas painting, which approaches but does not quite equal his masterpiece earlier shown at the Yares Gallery; and Steina Vvasulka's *Scapes of Paradoxy*, two video screens presenting seemingly magically transformed landscapes.

Regrettably, most of these works are clustered at the end of the exhibition. And instead of the exhibition. And instead of having a positive first impression of the show we find that before we even enter the museum we are annoyed by John Connell's *Waterbirds*, a tableaux installed on the roof of the museum and resembling papier mache birds perching, nesting and flying. they lack only pink paint to fully resemble updated kitsch flamingos.

Inside the museum matters do not at first improve. Behind a black wall with white exhibition text we find a small room with two television monitors playing simultaneously. Sometimes the two screens show the same clown with red hair rambling on about three people sitting around a campfire and one tells a story about three people sitting around a campfire and one tells a story about . . . Entitled *A Dark and Stormy Night* this sixty minute video by Bruce Nauman was created in 1987 and once again evidences the sophomore with which has typified this artist's oeuvre since its inception.

In a gallery to the left of the video presentation are three inept looking drawings by Mike Kelley including one of Saturn devouring one of his children. On a facing wall we see enlargements of these forgettable pictures covered with green plexiglass.

Bert Long's *Van Gogh* incorporates a huge frame around a blackboard and a shelf at the bottom of the composition supporting various objects including a human brain in a jar. Unfortunately, Long's pictures seem no more than contemporary excursions into Surrealism which somehow never seems to die even though the art movement lost its intellectual vigor nearly half a century ago.

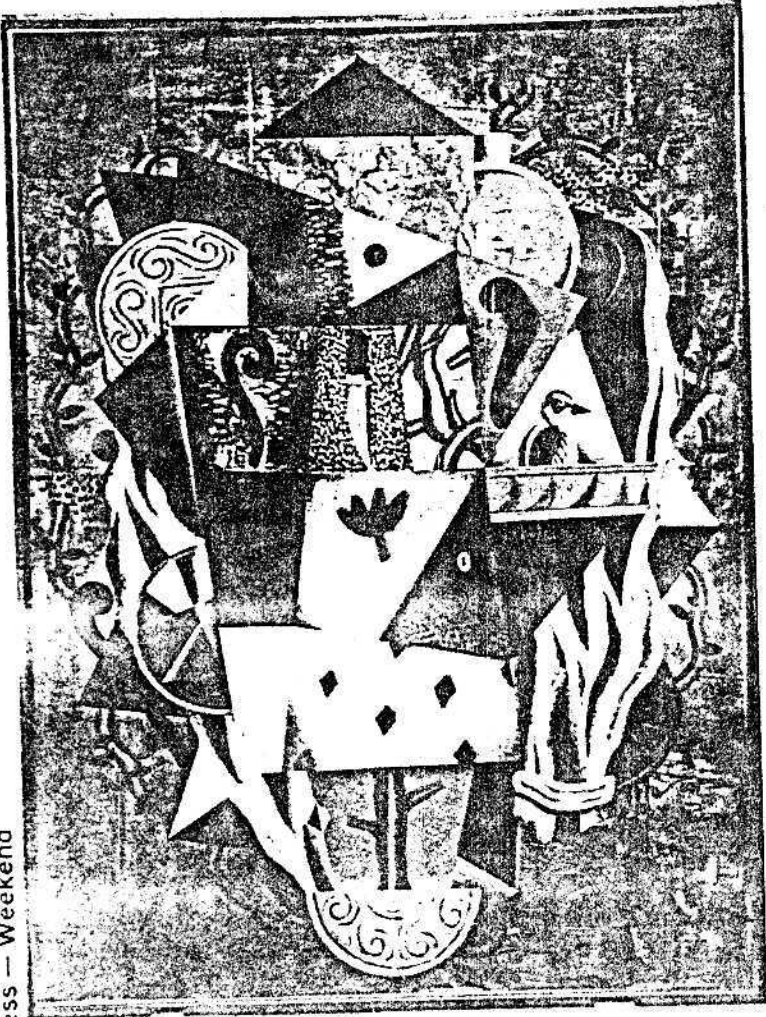
One of the most offensive works on view, at least for this viewer, is Bill Lundberg's *Con Tent*, a wooden tent with its sides covered with canvas. Inside the "tent" we see a brown tarp on the floor suggesting an open sleeping bag and at the end of the "tent" we see projected blurred silhouettes of a man and a woman talking while a recording of their conversation has the man talking incessantly about radiation, aliens, and God knows what else while the woman's comments are generally confined to "Mmmm" and "Oooh". In what should be a post-feminist age such a flashback to male chauvinism in the guise of a verbal/visual pun seems retarded at best.

Nancy O'Connor's *Hot Iron-Sharp Knife* incorporates six large color images of the same black man in a denim outfit and wearing a cowboy hat. In the bottom brown paper border of the composition is a childlike inscription which we hope unintentionally suggests that blacks are culturally and intellectually inferior to whites.

Michael Maglich's *Desert Nudes* is three miniature female torsos complete with explicit genitals and breasts, wooden branches for legs and medieval looking helmets seeming to cover their heads. Individually colored red, white or blue and mounted on the wall like giant insects, these female-insulting works cry out for their male counterparts to be similarly humiliated in the guise of art.

Donald Judd, justly famous twenty years ago, is represented by an untitled work from 1986 that looks like a cheap multiple created out of a series of colored metal "Kleenex" boxes. His untitled floor piece from 1977 is hardly better, resembling seven puny permutations of an aluminum box.

Tim Ebner is represented by two large works whose chief merit seems to reside in their being lent by influential collectors. *Color Cue #12* is a picture composed of sixteen square panels, four of which have



*My Heart* (Above), oil on canvas by Dan Rizzie. Lew Alquist (Below) with his *Hot Lunch*, a mixed media piece with electric motor, geiger counter and radioactive dinner plate.



Scottsdale (Ariz.) Progress — Weekend

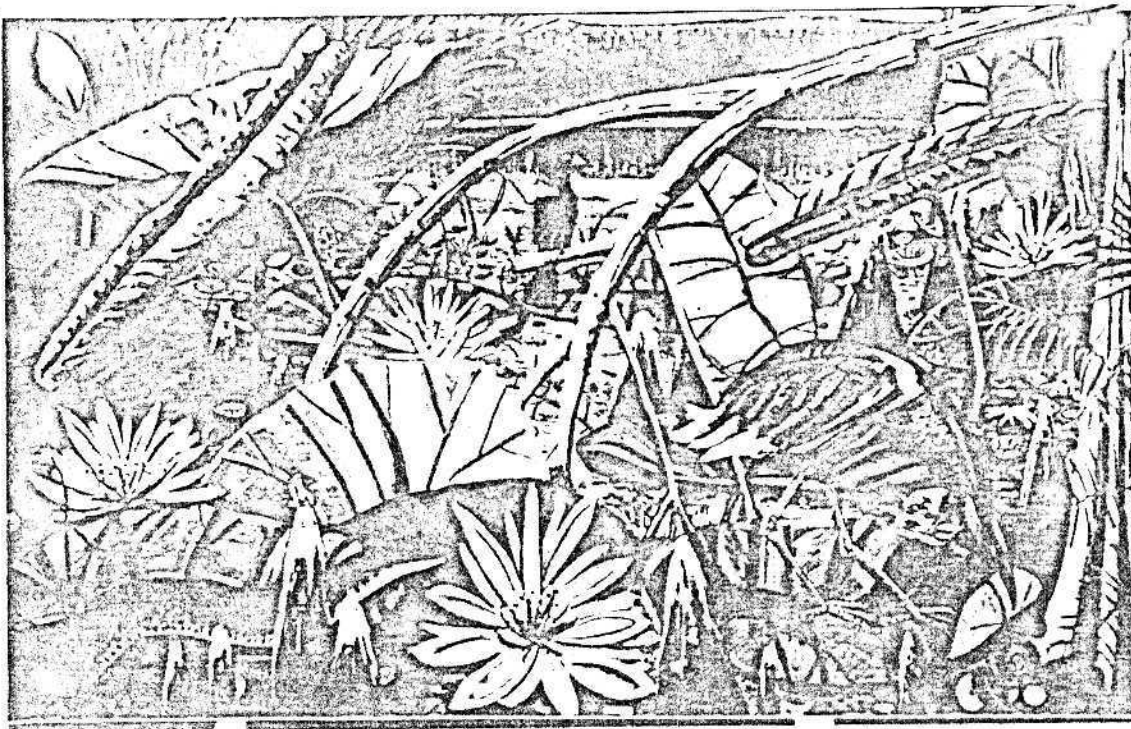
Friday, August 28, 1987

beige. The other panels are either turquoise or light blue.

Larry Bell is represented by a work from 1963 which seems about as relevant aesthetically as an automobile from the same period. As for the same artist's enormous glass box from 1985, well, it seems just as elegant and as impressive as a stream of nearly identical works in varying sizes that he has been creating for nearly twenty years.

In his catalogue essay, "Selection Criteria," Bruce D. Kurtz writes, "Well established, internationally prominent artists as well as mid-career and emerging artists are included in the 1987 Phoenix Biennial." He also observes, "Showing that mid-career and emerging artists can hold their own in the company of well established artists does more to further their careers than if they were shown separately."

Perhaps more importantly, it should also be noted that by aligning himself with well-connected art dealers, collectors and artists, particularly those who are recognized by the international art establishment, and by consistently reaffirming rather than questioning the values and concepts which emanate from New York, the world's major art market and leading contemporary taste maker, Bruce D. Kurtz can only significantly enhance his own future career as a contemporary art authority — outside the Southwest. □



Purple Galinule, oil on canvas by David Bates

## Birds welcome Biennial patrons

By VICTORIA BEAUDIN

**T**he cranes nesting on and flying off the Phoenix Art Museum roof have not fled the marshes for the desert sun. They are actually the work of New Mexico artist John Connell, one of many artists in the "Phoenix Biennial."

Connell's piece *Waterbirds*, however, is not a preview of the work inside. Whereas the majority of the artists in the Biennial are having discussions with modern art, Connell is carrying his own conversation.

The Chinese term "Yin and Yang," the two principles which refer to the active and passive or opposite roles in nature, is one of the better descriptions of John Connell's personality.

When he initially meets someone he is so shy he hesitates to look into their eyes. Yet once he begins talking he doesn't stop, excitedly jumping from subject to subject. All the topics are relevant but they don't make sense until he has ended the discussion because inevitably he returns to the topic to complete his thought.

Usually he inserts personal aphorisms such as, "Taste is a matter of tasteful repetition," which sound great even though one has to stop and think about it.

Unlike most of the pieces in the show, *Waterbirds* is site specific. Connell first looked at the museum location approximately six weeks prior to the show's opening. From this visit he made six drawings for six different sites. For logistical reasons the roof was decided upon.

Once these drawings were given an initial okay, or according to the artist "approved to be approved" by the city, he began to create. Within a period of fifteen days he made one and a half birds a day.

When Connell was creating the project his only criteria was achieving his "vision." He didn't take into account the length and weight of the birds or how he was going to transport them.

In talking about his creative vision, where he has ideas that don't leave, he said, "My stuff comes from somewhere, whether I want it to or not."

Hoping to clarify his point he added, "It's not like being insane. It's just that sometimes one is asked to make something."

The day I talked to him he was waiting to get his cable approved by the city engineer. Although he wasn't worried about getting the project passed, he made it a point to state that he refused to make his art according to someone else's specifications.

On another topic he stated, "I do what I want to do, and somehow it gets accepted." In reference to *Waterbirds* he could have said, "I do what I want to do, and somehow it gets completed."

Connell, in his own words, has a big van. But it was difficult accommodating 23 cranes, most of which have six feet wing spans. This is not taking into account the length of their necks.

Connell stuffed as many as he could inside the van. Those that didn't fit he strapped to the roof without any protection. According to the artist, "I thought I would give them a wind tunnel test. They got here all right. One had a broken neck, but it's easy to fix. They're just made of plaster, chicken wire, and cloth."

As nonchalant as he is about transporting his birds, it's another thing for the artist to arrange the pieces. Connell spent a better part of a week on the roof when the average temperature was 110 degrees.

"Even though I'm grousing about the heat, it's my choice. When I'm finished I'll be much happier. I could never have someone else put these things together. I have the belief in sensitivity to sight. The time spent doing it makes a difference." Putting the piece together is part of the vision.

Connell's art is so realistic, especially when compared to the art inside, one can't help but wonder how it fits in.

Curator Bruce Kurtz doesn't think Connell's work is very different. Kurtz believes that several pieces in the show are like Connell's in that they refer to the

metaphysical and spiritual aspects of life.

Connell, on the other hand, doesn't discuss his art according to what his contemporaries are doing, but speaks of it in its own terms. He believes his art is part of the "perennial ancient aesthetic." According to the artist, "The only thing contemporary about it is that it is being done now, and the way certain parts of the body are expressed. It's like seeing that instant now."

Connell began incorporating birds into his abstract paintings approximately 25 years ago when he was a young artist living in New York.

He moved to New Mexico in the mid-1960's. Ten of those years were on a farm where he worked on his art but rarely exhibited it. Most of the pieces were wood carvings and paintings, "all sort of nature oriented."

Connell stated, "I've worked completely isolated for years. A younger artist might be influenced by the current art world. But I don't read those magazines. Not out of

snootiness, I just have an awful lot to do. I don't know if I thrive on feedback."

Carl Johanns, another artist whose work is in the Biennial, works in the same studio space. According to Connell, "I appreciate what he does, but it doesn't rub off."

More than anything Connell is surprised by his success. "I'm one of those artists people laughed at. When I first made the birds I would spill the plaster and leave it. People asked why I didn't toilet train them. By the time I got used to it, people weren't laughing anymore."

Without bending to the art market, in his own words, "I making what I would have made anyway." Connell has achieved success. To him it "seems improbable that I am able to support six people doing what I do. Everything I've made I've sold. That's what so unusual."

What's he going to do after the flush of the exhibition opening? Connell is going home to work on his garden. "Art is supposed to be uplifting, but gardening is more peaceful." □



PHOTO: Jeff Havir

John Connell "nesting" one of his *Waterbirds*.