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Phoenix Biennial Is Important and Challenging

By: Robert S. Cauthorn

PHOENIX - "At the time when we come close to extinction, there will be intervention," drones the man in the small white tent. He talks to a woman, rambling oddly and crazily about flying saucers, aliens, Eisenhower and other things.

The speaker is on a film loop projected in Bill Lundberg's *Con Tent*, a multimedia sculpture that sports a small white tent and a movie projector.

The piece is one of the artworks assembled for the 1987 version of the Phoenix Art Museum's Phoenix Biennial, and the line about extinction and intervention might well be the exhibit's epigraph.

The show, which features the work of 32 artists from Southern California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, is likely to be controversial. Just as likely, it will be remembered as an important exhibition for the state.

The dominant spirit in this show's works is an anguished longing for values and moral order lost in our dangerous and perplexing times.

"At the time when we come close to extinction...."

Many of the pieces in this show reflect this and try, some successfully, some unsuccessfully, to find a higher ground.

"... there will be intervention."

And here, the intervention is art. Bert Long's heroic *Van Gogh* sits at the entrance of the show. Part painting, part wall construction, it is an ode to creativity.

The piece combines a painting of a blackboard marked with scientific formulas and personal notes, artifacts from Holland (a reference to Dutch painters), a photo of Einstein, a pair of ornate candlesticks, French bread near a silk flower and, sitting on a shelf in a magnifying glass jar filled with formaldehyde, a genuine human brain.

As curious as it sounds, *Van Gogh* is a riveting, knickknack shelf of a century of genius. Melancholy pervades the piece, yet beneath it one discovers a redemptive icon for the worship of human brilliance. Here is an intervention to the chilling of our 20th-century souls.

Many other artists ponder the interventions of art. Painters Dan Rizzie, Carl Johansen and several more in the show reconsider cubism and the work of Pablo Picasso with sometimes unsturdy results, while sculptor Allan Graham delivers an odd and delightful tribute to T.S. Eliot in *Constellation Eliot*, which is plastered with pages from his poem *The Wasteland*.

In a way, what these chaps are doing in a larger sense is more interesting than the individual pieces they produce.

By quoting from art history in their work, they both comment on the earlier art and ask whether these earlier events have any real relevance today. They invite us to consider how cubism and Picasso fare in the '80s – as contemporary art, sans the protective muffler of history.

It's a little like the fascination of children going through a trunk and trying on their parents' old clothes and looking for that shock of connection with the past and the feeling of being a grown-up.

Working in more personal directions, there is a generous rainy-day sort of yearning in Tucsonan Hoge Day's oil-and-tar paintings on weathered plywood.

In these gracious pieces, Day presents a number of smaller images within each picture: a bit of mountain here, a Grecian face there, a shadowy rendering of a desert bush. Day's paintings emerge almost as a portrait of a mind at work, each element the equivalent of insistent flashes of bittersweet memory.

This biennial's grasp is large and it includes works of many themes, from the unadulterated joyfulness of Jim Waid's bewitching *Sea Ania*, to solid works of mixed-media sculpture and installations.

New Mexico video artist Steina Vasulka's *Scapes of Paradoxy* is a two-screen meditation on the contrasts of water, ice, rock and desert. Video also plays a part in Tempe artist Dan Collins' clever *Virtual America III*. In a sculpture of green sheetrock and a video camera, viewers discover that what looks like an abraded smear on the work's surface becomes a map of the United States through the distortion of the video eye. Again, TV imagines America.

Another Tempe artist, Lew Alquist, has installed the topical *Hot Lunch*. Sitting in a cruelly lighted room, a black table rocks back and forth on a base that appears to be a coffin stand; on the table a mustard-yellow plate of Fiesta ware manufactured with a radioactive glaze slides back and forth, activating Geiger counters on the table. When we come close to extinction, our environment will become poisonous...

There are disappointing works, too, such as video artist Bruce Nauman's grueling, clownish hell of *Dark and Stormy Night*. Several artists also hang works that do little more than ape current New York fashions. These include Jeff De Lude's *Confrontation Brutal*, a narrative painting that buys into cheap melodrama. Similarly, Raul Guerrero's *Recuerdos de Acapulco*, is like a lint trap of various hip styles, while taking the general form of an homage to the paintings of poor, misguided Eric Fischl.

Ironically, there is a point to including even these pictures, they serve what seems to be the larger purpose of this exhibition.

Rather than just asking artists at large to enter slides, as was done in the past, Bruce Kurtz, the museum's gifted curator of 20th-century art, toured the region, visited artists' studios and invited them to show their work.

Kurtz has done a praiseworthy job. What we see here is a consideration of how Southwestern artists participate in the national dialogue of art. So along with the works inspired directly by experience in the region, we also find the influences of New York and Europe on the walls.

The show is a complicated melange of the intellect, dark emotion, cultural masturbation, and anything-goes daring that has characterized art of the 1980's. There is something here to anger and frighten almost everyone. But this is an estimable show with something to challenge us and make us think. And that is, after all, a central part of art's duty.

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