

9/00

Los Angeles Herald Examiner
August 25, 1987
Phoenix Joins Major Leagues In Art
By Christopher Knight

PHOENIX - If anyone doubted that curiosity would run high for the 1987 Phoenix Biennial, which opens today for a six week run at the Phoenix Art Museum, all misgivings evaporated at the preview reception as more than 1,000 museum patrons, artists and their friends braved the sweltering August heat for an advance look at the show.

The 1987 installment of the exhibition represents a major change in method from past Biennials and signals a bid by the museum to become a significant player in the field of contemporary art. If the goal outreaches the grasp in the present effort, it is in large measure because sights were set very high indeed.

The current Biennial features some 70 paintings, sculptures, assemblages, photographs and film and video installations by 32 artists who work in Southern California, New Mexico, Texas and the host state of Arizona. Among them are artists of international reputation, including John Baldessari (from Los Angeles), Bruce Nauman and Larry Bell (New Mexico) and Donald Judd (Texas).

Past Biennials were juried exhibitions open to any artist living in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah. Colorado and Utah have been replaced by Southern California and Texas. The process of selection-by-jury has been replaced with invitation by Phoenix Museum curator of 20th century art, Bruce Kurtz.

The alterations are wise ones. Based on brochures of past Biennials, the present installment is the first to turn away from the concept of museum-as-regional-art-club and toward one of museum-as-critical-interpreter of serious art. The endeavor could benefit from the selection of fewer artists, a greater sampling of work by those chosen and a less crowded installation. Nonetheless, the 1987 Phoenix Biennial, represents a major step forward.

The inclusion of Baldessari, Nauman, Bell and Judd is instructive. They came to prominence in the late 60's and early '70s with work that made important contributions in minimal and conceptual art. Minimalism and conceptualism form the bases of most of the strongest work in the show.

Familiar to Southern California audiences are the work of Mike Kelley, Raul Guerrero and Jill Giegerich (whose untitled plywood and tinted beeswax construction may be the single most beautiful object in the show). Less well-known are Arizona's Lew Alquist and Dan Collins, and New Mexican Steina Vasulka, whose installations compellingly probe notions as disparate as the fragility of memory and the politics of nuclear power.

Painting is a weak element in the exhibition and sculpture is almost non-existent. Where painting is at its best debts to minimalism, and conceptualism are often plain: the perceptual gestalts of John M. Miller; the generic, "standard brand" paintings by Tim Ebner; and Lari Pittman's decorative extravaganzas. The primary exception is Harmony Hammond's radiant abstraction, "Camposanto I."

Much of the two dimensional work incorporates techniques of collage and assemblage. Technically accomplished, most all of it is provincial in bearing. The exception is the work of Texan Bert Long, whose "Inheritance" turns cultural autobiography into a maniacal but loving assertion of outsider status.

End