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Phoenix Biennial: The Art Is Southwest, The Concepts New York

By: Joseph Young

The 1987 Phoenix Biennial exhibition differs from those held in the past in that Colorado and Utah 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 Baldesarri'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 Waid's *Sea Ania*, an acrylic on canvas painting, which approaches but does not quite equal his masterpiece earlier shown at the Yares Gallery; and Steina Vasulka'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 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 paper 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 sophomoric 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 plexi-glass.

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 seem 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 to 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 merits 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 photographic imagery of brush strokes printed in 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.

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