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REVIEWS

2010 California Biennial

The exhibition of California's contemporary practice turns inward

This year's California Biennial represents a turn inward. As curator of the [2008 iteration](#), Lauri Firstenberg controversially and memorably took the exhibition beyond the walls of the [Orange County Museum of Art](#) and out into sites from Tijuana to San Francisco. The current [2010 version](#), under OCMA curator Sarah Bancroft, is a return to a more traditional biennial form. That's not to say it's insular or opaque; rather it is a centralized exhibition that presents primarily studio-based work, while reining in site-specific and non-object-oriented practices, and art activism.



Several of the 45 Californians included actively engage the public sphere with their art, though when sited at OCMA, a certain tension arises between their not-quite-sanctioned work and museum walls and norms. The [L.A. Urban Rangers](#) collective contributes a clever reworking of a National Park Service information booth to trace their work quasi-trespassing on the so-called private beaches of Malibu. The Orange County-based group [Finishing School](#) built a green-screen studio to film a trailer for their forthcoming guerilla participation in the 2010 Venice Biennale. In addition to archiving a series of flash-mob-style concerts in *Walk to the Place*, David Wilson provides visitors with a map of a contemplative trek to a surprisingly natural spot in the manicured landscape of suburban Newport Beach. (It's worth noting though that when he tried to use this spot for one of his art gatherings, the police broke things up pretty quickly.) Most aggressive, and poignant, is Camilo Ontiveros' *California Biennial Law*, a proposition to mirror Arizona's draconian immigration bill 1070. His *Law* would have the museum admit free of charge any individual who appears to be an undocumented immigrant; unfortunately legal consul prevented the work from coming to fruition. Instead it is only noted by an inconspicuous text near OCMA's information desk.

Bancroft's biennial, which runs through March 13, also contains ample rigorous studio-based art. Mari Eastman's mixed-media canvases and Patrick Wilson's acrylics call back to historical masters and push forward toward some limits of contemporary painting. Alexandra Grant's vivid wordscapes—most notably, *First Portal (mind)*, 2008—chart a multitude of mental, physical and emotional processes. Tom Mueske's drawings mimic casual notebook doodles and thus belie their careful, time-consuming production. Both Zoe Crosher (with *The Unveiling of Michelle duBois*) and Drew Heitzler (with *There's Always Money in the Banana Stand*) position themselves as archivists for the fictional, or perhaps fictive archivists of the real. Bancroft plays out a nice juxtaposition of video as well between the composed improvisational mania of Stanya Kahn's *It's Cool, I'm Good*, and the improvised, material-over-composition of Vishal Jugdeo's *Thought Composition with Model of the World*.

Also worthy of note are the installations, which interact impishly with their audience. Alex Israel's *Property* is a vibrant selection of cinema props that encapsulates the artist's position as a practitioner, curator, blogger, and more. (It's a shame that this is one of the few references to any sort of web-based practice made in the exhibition, the other notable example being Nate Boyce's video piece, *Interface Increments*.) Carlee Fernandez likewise contributes a collection of objects in *Life After Death*; hers is a set of clothing (which the artist occasionally dons), taxidermied animals, and other vaguely rustic objects that adds up to a sort of performative transition to an after-life.

The California Biennial will always be faulted (particularly by Angelenos) for its over the mountains and through the woods quality. This incarnation is an effective summary of two years of art actions throughout the state, and a careful survey of the artists advancing the theory and practice of art. But it also feels specifically indebted, if not a response to, the 2008 biennial's attention to broader publics. At a moment when the biennial structure is, internationally and locally, in the process of redefinition, reconsideration, and redevelopment, Bancroft has offered an engaging contribution to the dialogue.

—Zachary Kaplan

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