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JANE FONDA
33 VARIATIONS
WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
MOISÉS KAUFMAN
Ahmanson Theatre
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Art review: California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art

January 6, 2011 | 4:00 pm

NEWPORT BEACH -- Biennial. These days the word generates conflicting responses of anticipation and dread.



Anticipation because any sizable survey of recent contemporary art assembled by a museum curator with an eye (plus an ear to the ground) will include at least some unexpected surprises. Juxtaposed with sure-things -- artists who, for one reason or another, drew unusual recent notice -- the biennial mixture can be lively and enlightening.

And dread because -- aside from the inevitable inclusion of mediocrities or worse -- there's always the possibility for big, unsustainable claims about so-called trends, which rarely fit into calendar-driven packages. Depending on the survey's geographical territory, a biennial can easily stray into myopia. And walking in the door, anyone who follows art already has a handy mental list of "clearly" better artists who would have been better to include to make a better show.

Orange County Museum of Art curator Sarah C. Bancroft is well aware of the duality. Her current California Biennial's catalog introduction, due to be published later this month, makes that plain. The particular fusion of anticipation plus dread is pretty much why biennials have the general reputation of being shows you love to hate.

For artists, smart satire is one way to respond. Finishing School, a collective of five artists who have worked together since 2001, takes the international proliferation of biennial shows as a starting point. Inside OCMA they've set up a makeshift film studio, complete with green screen, for an ambiguous, audience-participation production titled "54" -- as in Studio 54, one presumes -- which will relocate to Italy in June to shoot more scenes at the Venice Biennale.

Feel free to sign up for an improvisational part in their Warhol-style soap opera. (If James Franco can do it on "General Hospital," why not you at OCMA?) In a celebrity-driven society and an art school-driven museum scene, no need to go to Switzerland for training in the established etiquette of cultural and social activities. Biennials are the art world's new finishing school.

In response to an invitation to be included in the 2010 California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art, Camilo Ontiveros proposed a work titled Free Entry (California Biennial Logo) and asked the museum to change its admission policy as follows:

WHERE REASONABLE SUSPICION EXISTS THAT A PERSON ENTERING THE MUSEUM IS AN ALIEN WHO IS UNLAWFULLY PRESENT IN THE UNITED STATES, A REASONABLE ATTEMPT SHALL BE MADE, WHEN PRACTICABLE, TO GRANT THIS PERSON FREE ACCESS TO THE MUSEUM DURING THE COURSE OF THE CALIFORNIA BIENNIAL.

The museum rejected his proposal with the following response:

After considerable discussion among the staff and Board of Trustees, the Museum determined that it could not accommodate Camilo Ontiveros's request to grant free access to the museum during the course of the 2010 California Biennial as described in the artist's proposal. In so doing, the Museum would be placed in the position of discriminating on the basis of race or nationality in addition to being contrary to the Museum's mission, values and established policies such practices are illegal in the State of California. Passed in 1959, the Unruh Civil Rights Act reads:
ALL PERSONS WITHIN THE JURISDICTION OF THIS STATE ARE FREE AND EQUAL AND NO MATTER WHAT THEIR SEX, RACE, COLOR, RELIGION, ANCESTRY, NATIONAL ORIGIN, DISABILITY, MEDICAL CONDITION, MARITAL STATUS, OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION ARE ENTITLED TO THE FULL AND EQUAL ACCOMMODATIONS, ADVANTAGES, FACILITIES, PRIVILEGES, OR SERVICES IN ALL BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENTS OF EVERY KIND WHATSOEVER.

piece -- not to mention Arizona's retrograde politics -- for an outcome that is oddly affirming for the artist, the institution and a viewer.

The 45 artists and collectives in the biennial are mostly younger (just nine are older than 40) and few are well established. That enhances a sense of discovery.

One example is Wu Tsang, whose projected video "Damelo Todo" -- "Give Me Everything" -- interweaves unsuspected subjects in unforeseen ways. Largely shot at a gritty MacArthur Park nightclub, varied immigrants and unengaged revelers, who are only sometimes likely to be the same person, emerge as sharing a startlingly similar status as aliens living in a strange land. Wu celebrates that status for its antic wonder.

Another is Luke Butler. A suite of six modest-size paintings of scenes plucked from "Star Trek" could have been wince-inducing. But Butler, who isolates characters and bits of landscape against flat fields of color, approaches the popular cult show like a Pre-Raphaelite consecrating mythic national literature or Benjamin West painting "The Death of General Wolfe" in 1770.



Three paintings show dead heroes. Two have Capt. Kirk shielding his eyes from an unseen horror. One arrests Spock in mid-dissolve, he beaming up or down. Together they transform the subjects into a peculiar breed of history painting, albeit each roughly the size of a TV screen.

A third is Alex Israel, who manages to wring yet one more drop from the Dada-dishrag that is now Minimal Duchamp. Duchamp's words about some mental from Hollywood seem, however -- too hot for...

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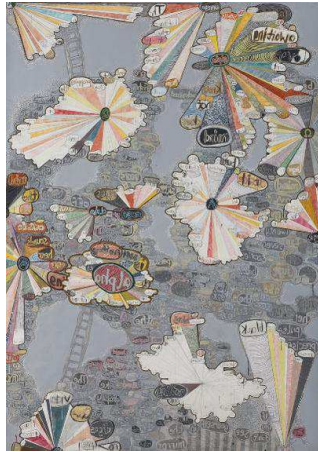
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shaped cookie jar, clocks, Egyptian Horus -- and isolated on pedestals like Brancusi sculptures or, for the Horus, between two mirrors that reflect and cleave a blue tarp into a parting sea.

Knowing that the props will return to storage when the show is over turns Israel's temporary installation-narrative into something approaching an actual 3-D "movie." Given the objects' ordinariness, a salutary sense of estrangement slowly descends on all the other objects one encounters after leaving his installation.



The biennial format, which encourages grazing among disparate aesthetic forms, bouncing from one to the next, can make some work difficult to engage. Wu's documentary and Stanya Kahn's brash video of a wounded but plucky disaster victim adrift in the modern landscape are, at 20 and 35 minutes, respectively, a different breed from Violet Hopkins' tiny, exquisite, colored pencil drawings of eruptions or John Zurier's big, atmospheric abstract paintings, in which a surface abrasion on pale color functions as discreet interior drawing. Time-based videos require handing over attention to the artist's schedule in a way that paintings don't.

And sculptures -- at least in the form of stand-alone objects of the sort so successfully and abundantly chronicled by the 2005 exhibition, "Thing," at the UCLA Hammer Museum -- are almost non-existent here. An expression of curatorial disinterest, in favor of the now

hoary format of installation art?

The show has a lot of neo-art -- that is, neo-Ed Ruscha, neo-Monique Prieto, neo-Center for Land Use Interpretation, neo-Nam June Paik, neo-Judy Fiskin, even neo-Josef Albers -- all by other artists. In most instances these works are attempting to draw out something new, but the practitioners aren't free of their artistic sources' gravitational pull.

Still, the show, on view to March 13, has a lot to offer -- Katy Grannan's re-invigoration of pedestrian street-photography; Brian Dick's performances with piñatas cum professional sports-style mascots acting up at art events; Alexandra Grant's poetic, inside-out word drawings; Carlee Fernandez's disassembled taxidermy self-portrait; Drew Heitzler's narrative mapping of Orange County through tracks perceived among people (tech CEO Ellen Hancock, historical real estate lawyer George Hugh Smith, tract home builder Bruce Karatz), places (Newport Beach, Orange, Irvine) and things (Central Pacific Railroad, wildfires, Boeing Co.); and more.

I was engaged by about a third of the works on view. Altogether that might not sound like a lot. For a biennial, however, it's actually quite good.

-- Christopher Knight

@twitter.com/KnightLAT

California Biennial 2010, Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach, (949) 759-1122, through March 13, www.ocma.net

Photos, from top: Brian Dick (in collaboration with Christen Sperry-Garcia), "OCMAscot," 2010; Camilo Ontiveros, "Free Entry (California Biennial Law)," 2010; Luke Butler, "Landing Party II," 2009; Alexandra Grant, "First Portal (mind)," 2008

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I mostly love contemporary art but I'll be sure to miss this humorless show. Sorry, OCMA and C Knight, this review did not convince me to make the schlep. BTW, who is funding this stuff?

Posted by: tda | January 06, 2011 at 05:57 PM

your second to last paragraph is a list of what you like/approve. So? Why? Just a case of "i like" "like" how? tired, tired, tired.

Posted by: henry | January 06, 2011 at 08:00 PM

"The 45 artists and collectives in the biennial are mostly younger (just nine are older than 40) and few are well established."

Old artists never die, they just fade away...

Posted by: Charles J | January 07, 2011 at 10:49 AM

I saw the show the first week. The friend I went with wanted her money back. Don't go unless you are getting paid to see it.

Posted by: Mery Lynn | January 07, 2011 at 12:13 PM

Seems like some of these artists and the curator might be targets of the current - not with love feelings - that are so much a part of the political world and are now an issue in the art world and with this show.

Posted by: tom | January 11, 2011 at 10:39 PM

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