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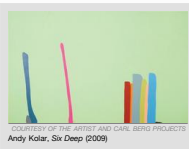
Orange you glad I didn't say Biennial?

Calli Bi at OCMA, plus Sean Duffy and John Paul Jones at LAM

By **Doog Harvey** Thursday, Nov 18 2010 | Comments (10)

The California Biennial at the Orange County Museum of Art is a tradition dating back to 1984, when the venue was known as the Newport Harbor Art Museum and its chief curator was Paul Schimmel, now at L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art. The Orange County museum was renamed OCMA in the mid-'90s, and the venue's importance to the L.A. art scene has waxed and waned over the intervening decades, but the series of biennials in the new millennium — unrivaled except for *L.A. Weekly's* Annual Biennial — have afforded it a new centrality, at least for a few months every couple of years.

The art boom of the last decade was reflected in the increasing ambitions of the Cali Bi, culminating in 2008's extravaganza, which featured more than 50 artists and multiple venues including outposts in Tijuana and Northern California, guest-curated by LAXART founder and director Lauri Finstenberg. Well, the boom's gone bust and Finstenberg is scheming with Annie Philbin at the Hammer Museum to steal OCMA's thunder with the Hammer's recently announced 2012 Los Angeles Biennial.



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In the meantime, OCMA has scaled back its Biennial (I'm really starting to hate that word) to a more manageable 45 artists selected by in-house curator Sarah Bancroft. The show returns the focus to lesser-known up-and-comers, while retaining the expansive regionalism that allows for substantial contributions from Bay Area and San Diego art communities. As with any of these omnibus extravaganzas, the work on view is a hit-and-miss grab-bag, and the surprise quotient is crucial.

Thus the most impressive paintings in the show — one-half of Alexandra Grant's expansive, seething six-part "Portal" series of her trademark backward word clusters on enormous sheets of paper — lose considerable punch for having been exhibited at her L.A. gallery two years ago. In contrast, John Zurier — a Berkeley-based midcareer monochromatic abstract painter — materializes out left field with a series of luminous pale-blue oils on linen that quietly steal the show. Violet Hopkins' sumptuous new Korschach inkblots on black paper are just enough removed from both Bruce Conner's inkblot works and her own meticulously controlled illusionism to claim originality.

Some of the better-known locals surprise with uncharacteristic new work. Mari Eastman's *Moonscope With Fo-Day* (2010) is the first painting I've seen of hers that seems to emphasize her strengths as a painter, which curiously enough results in a near-monochromatic near-abstract. Carlee Fernandez, whose modified taxidermy sculptures never seemed to own up to their Ilsa Koch connotations, has produced a substantial new performance/installation work that finally and literally addresses the biological equivalency of the artist and her subjects/materials.

Other standouts include Andy Ralph's mutant lawn chair and kinetic trash-can sculptures and David Adey's poignantly hilarious *Pump* (2007-2010, a sort-of St. Sebastian football on life support); both artists emerged from San Diego's Point Loma Nazarene University, whatever that signifies.

The central conceit of recent USC grad Alex Israel's installation is that it's assembled entirely from rented movie props, giving it an off-the-shelf regional specificity and clever appropriationist hook that — in tandem with Israel's attempt to pass off his line of designer sunglasses as an art project — would normally leave me cold. Instead, I found *Property* (2010) surprisingly engaging both on a formal visual level (particularly the central tableau of Osiris seated between two facing mirrors above a pedestal-mounted seascape quilt) and for the loose, collage narrative that emerges from the not-quite-deliberate arrangement of not-quite-random artifacts.

The recent institutional enthusiasm for relational aesthetics, collectivism, political engagement, etc., is given the nod with the inclusion of L.A. Urban Rangers' democratizing *Malibu Public Beaches* (2007-2010) information kiosk, Brian Dick & Christen Sperry-Garcia's ravey DayGlo custom mascots (fabricated by the artisans at Pifata World in El Monte) and *Glouffiti Room*, and a cluster of works collected into a coherent curatorial aside in a small supplemental gallery: David (not of the Museum of Jurassic Technology) Wilson's walking and drawing guided tourism, Electronic Disturbance Theater/b.a.n.g. lab's mobile GPS phones hacked to locate water resources for thirsty border-crossers, Finishing School's inexplicably funny interactive-cinema exploration of Biennialism titled *54* (2010-2011), and Juan Capistrano's autobiography-laced DIY house-party kit.

Overall, though, the 2010 California Biennial has a something-for-everybody feel that kind of pisses me off. And diminishes its sense of currency — a problem compounded by work that is overly familiar (or not patently derivative: Andy Kolar's pointlessly handsome homages to Monique Prieto's mid-'90s revival of '60s color-field painting tropes; Lisa Williamson's (USC MFA '08) suspiciously Amanda Ross-Ho-esque (USC MFA '06) array of black-and-white diagrammatic reductivisms; Luke Butler's fetishized, isolated scenes of Captain Kirk in emotionally charged scenes from the original *Star Trek*).

If OCMA wants to maintain its lead in the coming biennial wars, it needs to get more cranky, opinionated and idiosyncratic before it mounts its next, delayed iteration in 2013.

The redundancy of Butler's Captain Kirk paintings probably isn't an obvious thing to most. In fact, it's a freakish enough coincidence that the artist himself probably isn't aware of it, but L.A. artist Sean Duffy — whose ambitious solo project *Searcher* is currently on view just down the Pacific Coast Highway from OCMA at the Laguna Art Museum — began his career in the mid-'90s with re-creations of scenes from the original *Star Trek*, utilizing materials such as collaged fun-fur under clear upholstery vinyl, with Captain Kirk as the central, iconic figure.

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