
Biennial hits — and misses

By Sebastian Smee

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PORTLAND, Maine — Experience teaches one not to expect too much from surveys of contemporary art. A good biennial, for instance, can be defined as one in which between 40 percent and 60 percent of the work is worth looking at.

In a poor biennial, the percentage might be 20 to 30. The difference between success and failure, in other words, is not great. But you sure feel it.

On the spectrum leading from good to bad, there's a psychological tipping point after which it becomes impossible to get excited about even the good stuff, because your spirit is so weighed down by the preponderance of drivel.

Good biennials, on the other hand, are genuinely uplifting. You may still have to wade through a lot of dross, but the rewards are not just isolated and sporadic, they are cumulative.

This year's Portland Museum of Art Biennial is good. I reckon just under half the works merit sustained attention. That's not bad, when you consider that there are 47 artists taking part, that they work in a bewildering array of styles and media, and that each is represented by just one or two works.

Without question, the show's outstanding piece is Selena Kimball's 23-foot long collage, "The New World." Kimball is a Maine native who lives and works in Brooklyn, N.Y. She works primarily with collage, and sets herself unusual constraints.

"The New World," for instance, is made from the cut-up and reconstituted pages of a single book: John Stoddard's "Glimpses of the World," a photographic travelogue published in 1894.

The resulting work, striking in its fragility, stretches across the best part of one wall before bending onto another. Most of what we see is a void of off-white paper glued together, the top and bottom edges undulating unevenly, like the cartoon outline of a cloud or a giant speech bubble. But running in a long, winding strip through the middle of this puff of nothing is a stream of integrated imagery of the strangest kind: mountainous landscapes that blur and twist; outbreaks of grandiose architecture, with spires and columns turned upside down; a group of lynched businessmen hanging from a tree; and a Native American man with the hind legs of a horse standing outside a tepee.

The work is too big to take in at once. Instead, you view it as you walk, as you would a horizontal Chinese scroll painting. The space is cubist one moment and dazzlingly deep the next, as Kimball's technique of slice and dice rubs up against Stoddard's scenic, deep-focus views.

In an artist's statement in the catalog, Kimball says she knows she has found good material when she finds a book she wants to keep intact. "If it feels really risky, terrifying even, to imagine destroying the original, I know the images are resonating with me at an emotional level."

Collage, of course, is inherently surreal. Implicit in the technique is disruption, obliging viewers to embrace the arbitrary. Along with that goes a spiritual take on the world pregnant with both wonder and skepticism: wonder at the untamed oddness of the world; skepticism in the face of more orthodox attempts to represent it.

In “The New World” Kimball disrupts Stoddard’s seductive but sentimental vision. Her purpose, it seems, is not to upbraid him, but to create a new and poetic whole, something that for all its strange collisions, all its barely-holding-together, feels unaccountably true. How brilliantly she has succeeded!

What else stood out? Three large, meandering wall sculptures, for starters. One of them, by Michael Shaughnessy, is made from hay bound into thick, twisting ropes that spiral and squirm across the architecture of the museum’s Great Hall. The effect could easily be cutely rustic and crafty. But it’s not. It’s raw, muscular, visceral — an impressive achievement.

Another is Natasha Bowdoin’s riff on Lewis Carroll’s “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.” This more delicate piece is made from cut paper decorated with barely decipherable words inscribed in pencil and gouache. Twisting organically up one wall, it’s part of a recent trend in art which sees artists transpose meaning not so much into nonsense — as in Dada — but into splendidly pointless decoration. The effect is to remind us of Gaston Bachelard’s proposition: “The world is beautiful before it is true.”

A third sprawling piece, by Alisha Gould, consists of dozens of small, trumpet-shaped clay vessels arranged randomly across a wall. The work is called “Ejecta,” a term apparently used to denote the debris expelled from meteorite impacts, or stellar explosions.

Each vessel is painted white on the outside and black on the inside. The fluting rims of the vessels are uneven. The whole piece has an unforced, biological feel. On the one hand, it evokes the handmade and humanly known; on the other, dark, invisible interiors, mystery . . .

More empirical and exact — but no less wonderful — is August Ventimiglia’s snap-line chalk drawing which takes up significant acreage on yet another wall. Ventimiglia’s work has appeared recently at the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. (He also has a solo show at the June Fitzpatrick Gallery around the corner on Congress Street in Portland.) His work is disciplined, at times severe, yet, in its attention to process and its almost accidental beauty, consistently engrossing.

There’s a good deal of photography on display. Much of it tries to ascend on thermals of nature-loving soulfulness — an understandable preoccupation in these parts — only to plummet violently off cliffs of kitsch. But I liked the grainy moodiness of Robert Monroe’s “Victoria Winters Project #19, Portland, Maine” and Siri Sahaj Kaur’s arresting portrait of a fresh-faced female wrestler, “Kristie.”

Among the painters, too, landscape is the prevalent genre. Barely any of it sticks in the mind. But there’s something about the intensity of the colored light in Carol Aronson-Shore’s shadow-strewn rendering of a huddle of houses that I liked. And I found my eyes returning more than once to Beverly Rippel’s large-scale painting, in oozing oil and wax, of a pink cap gun. Rippel captures the toy’s transparency deftly.

Suzannah Sinclair has painted a rapturously melancholic watercolor of a female nude from a vintage men's magazine. Her work intrigues me. Her model, full-breasted and blond, is shown against a forested landscape of quivering, almost Cézanne-like delicacy. Like much of Sinclair's work, it's appallingly close to cheese — and ridiculous cheese at that. But it harbors an icy romanticism, and lifts off into thwarted, heartfelt realms.

There are other strong works. I liked Carly Glovinski's trompe l'oeil sculptures, Clint Fulkerson's detailed pencil drawings, Alicia Eggert's kinetic wall piece — replete with proximity sensors, Mark Wethli's abstract paintings on aged wood, Avy Claire's winter trees constructed from words inscribed onto hanging transparent sheets, and Kim Bernard's bouncing orange teardrops.

Much of the rest of the work, it has to be said, fails to rise above the standard of a high school fund-raising art fair. But in a way, that makes the experience of picking out the good stuff all the more satisfying.

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