

The Denver Post

Exhibit shines spotlight on contemporary art
'10+10' represents big step for Colorado scene

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Kyle MacMillan

Denver Post Critic-at-Large

Memo: Corrections RAN 6/6/03: Because of an editing error, the day for the opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver's "2003 Colorado Biennial: 10+10" was reported incorrectly on Page 1F Thursday. The debut and a public reception will be held today.

Caption: PHOTO: The Denver Post/Lyn Alweis

The exhibit '2003 Colorado Biennial: 10+10' at the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver includes Jeff Starr's glazed earthenware titled 'Droop, 2003' at front right.

The art world loves biennials - and with good reason.

The cyclical showcases offer an overarching snapshot of what is happening in a specific geographic locale, ranging from a city to the whole world, as is the case with the famed Venice Biennale.

Such events provide welcome opportunities to reassess and reorient. Some draw critical fire and downright condemnation, but the successful ones re-energize a scene by offering surprises and fresh takes on the familiar.

The Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver's wonderfully exciting "2003 Colorado Biennial: 10+10," which opens Friday with a public reception from 6 to 9 p.m., falls solidly in the second category.

It resonates with a sense of the new, edgy and unconventional, making a strong case that Colorado finally is moving from the periphery toward the center of the dialogues taking place at the vanguard of contemporary art.

Although the state, of course, has long sported a roster of established and respected artists, it has seemed for some time that there had to be other talented artists within its borders that were not known, for whatever reason.

This exhibition conclusively confirms that suspicion, shining the spotlight on a sizable assortment of artists who not only don't have commercial gallery representation but also are hardly known at all. Even Cydney Payton, the museum's director/curator, who chose the show's initial 10 artists from among 460 entries, was unfamiliar with at least a quarter of the final participants before the selection began. Besides infusing "10+10" with zing, this influx of new, quality talent is likely to send shock waves through Colorado's art world, possibly forcing some realignments in the accepted artist hierarchy - an always healthy development.

Significantly boosting the exhibition is the consistency of the overall aesthetic, which can be described as an emphasis on newer media such as video and installation, challenging conceptual work and the just plain brash.

Such cohesiveness is difficult to achieve in any large-scale, cross-sectional show of this kind, let alone one with the unusual, open-ended organizational structure of this one.

After picking the first 10 artists, Payton then asked each of them in turn to choose another artist, a two-step process that explains the offering's subtitle, "10+10." (To be precise, 19 artists are taking part, because the collaborative group Ilk did not pick anyone else.)

By relinquishing curatorial control of half of the show, Payton took a considerable risk. But it largely worked out, because each of the initial artists tended to pick someone else stylistically or philosophically aligned with their own work.

This cross-pollination produced some engaging counterpoints in the exhibitions, especially on the second floor. The intriguing, meticulously crafted wall sculptures of Michelle Gonzalez of Denver, for example, are complemented with equally intriguing counterparts on the opposite wall by Martha Russo of Ward, with their unsettling combinations of clay, pig intestines and dried fruit.

Familiar faces

The only works that seem conspicuously out of place are the two realist paintings by John Hull of Englewood, which, however meritorious they might be on their own, simply don't fit this exhibition's more avant-garde vibe.

A notable aspect of the artist picks was their predilection to choose more established artists, such as Emilio Lobato and Hull. Indeed, virtually all of the familiar figures in the show were chosen not by Payton but the artists she selected.

One of the most interesting such pairings is that of David Brady of Denver, one of the most promising of the city's young artists, and his artist pick, Phil Bender, a longtime fixture at the venerable Denver artist cooperative Pirate.

In perhaps the most daring and imaginative of the show's offerings, "Inside-out," Brady has hooked 10 speakers along the museum's exterior to 10 microphones mounted unobtrusively around the exhibition, so that an ever-changing cacophony of conversations can be heard outside. That should be especially true during Friday's opening reception.

This sound work, which in many ways is a kind of subversive performance piece because it depends on the participation of unwitting museumgoers, involves chance and spontaneity in ways that surely would have made iconoclastic artist and composer John Cage proud.

Bender's pieces too often can come off as just accumulations of stuff, but here he has pushed himself to create a piece with a real sculptural quality. He has filled an antique bathtub with colorful vintage Christmas balls to sensuous, eye-catching effect.

While the museum has gone out of its way to provide information about the participating artists and insights into their choices, organizers decided not to follow the frequent practice of force-feeding interpretations. Instead, they will allow viewers to draw their own conclusions about each work.

Eclecticism on display

No doubt a specific concept, for example, lies behind "It's Good to Get Out," an impressive if tough installation by Chris Lavery of Boulder, who recently earned his master of fine arts degree at the University of Colorado. But knowing his thoughts should not be and are not essential to appreciating this work.

With an eclectic economy of means, he creates an evocatively oppressive scene - five bound Christmas trees suspended horizontally, five pairs of fluorescent lights mounted on the walls and a ragtag stereo system with a couple of masses of speakers playing the annoying sounds of yapping dogs who sometimes sound as if they are in pain.

Another installation deserving of notice is "Parabola Affirmed" by Daniel Raffin, an assistant professor of art at Colorado College in Colorado Springs. This poetic work conjures a lake or ocean, with plastic green buttons spread across the saturated blue paint on the floor to suggest glistening points in the sunshine. Three white ceiling fans have been mounted about a foot above the floor, creating a totally unexpected and magical effect. Offering just the right finishing touch is a video projected on the wall behind. ``10+10" represents a huge step in the continuing growth of the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Colorado art scene in general. It should not be missed.

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