

VISUAL ARTS

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The 1997 Oregon Biennial, curated by Kathryn Kanjo, may be the ultimate reminder that our region's artists are among its richest treasures.

Patrick Stearns' *Westside Light Rail* tests the formal possibilities of photography.

Can-Do Kanjo

REVIEW

Portland Art Museum
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226-2811
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The top three award winners for this year's Oregon Biennial are Geraldine Ondrizek (\$1,000 prize), Laura Ross-Paul (\$500 prize) and Storm Tharp (\$500 prize).

Biennial curator Kathryn Kanjo has been the museum's curator of contemporary art for nearly 1½ years. She previously served at the Whitney Museum in New York and the San Diego Museum of American Art.

Every two years, the local art world is thrown up in arms. It's *de rigueur* to second guess the Oregon Biennial, the glittering pageant of our state's "best and emerging artists." After the hype settles the critical debate begins, and two views almost always prevail: The biennial has either forsaken good taste for mere elitist trends or it has forsaken fresh, cutting-edge talent for more established artists. Indeed, the heated discussion it provokes seems to be the biennial's only indisputable aspect. The 1997 Oregon Biennial will no doubt cause its own fuss and rancor, but because of this year's highly judicious selection process—of nearly 1,000 applicants, a minuscule 34 were chosen—it will probably be less strident than usual.

Contrary to the buzz around town, this year's biennial is actually no more risky or groundbreaking than the last one, which included more than 100 artists. Were Richey

Bellinger, Clint Brown or Rosemary Hammer household names in 1995? I doubt they were more celebrated or better known than Kristen Miller, James Richard Clark or Matthew Lyon, three artists chosen this year. Six of this year's artists—Michael Brophy, Tom Cramer, Dianne Kornberg, Rae Mahaffey, Marilyn Robert and Tad Savinar—were also picked for the last biennial. Similarly, most of this year's artists have a profile in the art community, from proven gallery commodities like Brophy to artist-about-town James Harrison and even Peter Wegner, a conceptual artist who has never exhibited here but is known for his former work as a copywriter for the advertising firm Wieden and Kennedy.

Over all, this year's biennial hasn't made a substantial break with the past, except in the smaller number of applicants chosen, which means fewer obligatory selections and greater depth and individual focus for each artist. Although it neither supports nor rejects the status quo, the current biennial is still a superb, if diffuse, group show. It is also a triumph for curator

Kathryn Kanjo, who in her relatively short time in Portland has emerged as the headiest of curators.

Choosing artists who work in a wide range of media, from large-scale installation to ceramics, Kanjo has molded a biennial that defies easy categorization. If her cerebral, New York-trained eye occasionally veers toward obscurity, such tweeky intellectualism is rare and welcome stock in these parts.

But Kanjo's conceptual, left-brained impulse is only one of the strengths of this biennial. Every biennial promises the public a glimpse at new artists who could become standard bearers, and this year is no exception. Look beyond the veterans on the throne, Brophy, Cramer, Christine Bourdette, Savinar et al.—all fine artists—and you will see the bright stars of the future:

Tori Ellison's fractured dresses, which allude to worlds of pain and beauty; Harrison's warped sculptural machinations; Geraldine Ondrizek's coolly precious installation of museum-type artifacts; photographers Mick Briscoe and Patrick Stearns, both in their 40s, testing their medium's

endless formal possibilities; Joseph Biel and Richard Kraft's grid composition, which creates the illusion of an elaborate, suspended history; Julia Stoops' mystical mixed-media charts; and Wegner's elegantly placid installation, pregnant with meaning. But it may be Molly Vidor (whose last exhibition received a luke-warm write-up by this reviewer) who shines brightest. In the thick, blood-red impasto of her gorgeous dahlias, there is the hint of a mas-

ter waiting to blossom. Here is an occasion for this critic to admit that hindsight has proven to be the better sight.

There is, of course, a second tier of artists in this biennial who also deserve mention: The popular Laura Ross-Paul, who after years of painting has found new waters of creativity; Trude Parkinson, whose oddly affecting installation hangs just as gloriously as it did in the Nine Gallery last winter; Lee Imonen's herculean wood sculptures; and two BonaKeane Gallery artists, Thomas Orr and Dharma Strasser, whose beautiful, formal compositions prove that those who dismiss ceramics are lost in the '50s—the 1850s.

Finally, to address the inevitable issue: The 950 or so applicants who were not chosen for this year's biennial have not missed a thing—though I doubt any of them is shedding a salty tear. No matter the grand claims, the Oregon Biennial is rarely a true barometer of the state's "best" artists. Many of our region's most acclaimed artists, like Eric Stotik, D.E. May and Kevin Kadar, did not make it this year.

Moreover, no matter how it's presented, which artists are chosen or who the curator is, the biennial is really an Event, and it should be enjoyed as an unadulterated celebration of the visual arts—no more, no less. The 34 artists chosen this year have much to be proud of. These artists have earned a gold mark on their résumé—but it would be an insult to the biennial's true spirit to regard them any better than their peers. **WWW**



Tori Ellison's fractured dresses allude to worlds of beauty and pain—and a bright future for the artist.