

[art] Home videos

The 2005 Biennial captures the family of Maine art

BY MAGGIE KNOWLES

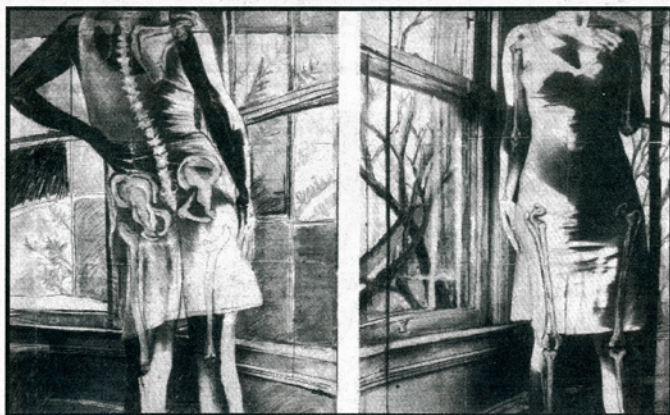
It's an ass. A very white, hairless ass. It bubbles up from a garden, a smooth hill in a landscape of freshly turned soil. The hint of testicles droop between the upper thighs and rest upon the moist dirt. I lean closer to the TV screen. Although not sure why the ass is in the garden, I appreciate the life-like qualities of the sculpture. Then it quivers, shakes, trembles uncontrollably. Dear god, the ass is alive! In the coming minutes, I stand partly in horror and partly in fascination as the ass attempts to rise from the cold dirt — and brings artist Michael Zheng with it. Bless the muse of absurdity, for without her the artist would not have videotaped himself being buried alive (save for the aforesaid buttocks) for — not two or even ten — but for EIGHTY MINUTES. Again . . . dear God!

The Portland Museum of Art 2005 Biennial shows April 7 through June 5. Call (207) 775-6148.

This nugget, plus many others ranging from one to 10 on the absurd scale, are all part of the Portland Museum of Art's 2005 Biennial which runs through June 5. Since it has been two years since the last biennial, let's refresh what it is: The Biennial allows Joe Local (sort of) Artist to say their work has been shown in a medium-city museum. And that's only one step away from a large-city museum.

The PMA is very excited about this show because a record 948 artists sent in slides to be scrutinized by three jurors. Sixty-two walked away with the honor of being hung. How the jurors decide is the big secret, but I can say that all artists are from, were schooled, or have an exhibition history in Maine. Interestingly enough, the jurors are from away; one summers here . . . but that does not a Maineiac make. Because of that, the show feels more urban than it would if local jurors were on the panel. But that's a good thing — every once in a while it's healthy to wear a pink boa with Bean boots.

In addition to the ass video, there are five other videos — a new biennial trend; last time there was only one. Naked men seem to be the other trend, a trend followed closely by Tad Beck in his hypnotic piece "roll." In a dark room, four giant shims hover in the space. Four taut-bodied (naked) athletes try to stay upright as they walk on logs in the



"SECOND LADY" AND "THIRD LADY," 2004, photocopy, ink, charcoal, gesso, and pencil on paper, by Colleen Kinsella.

water. Beck is taping as he treads water, so a.: He is as tired as the rollers and, b.: You get a great viewpoint when they fall. The falls are the best part, like fights in a hockey game. Every 12 seconds at least two, if not all, of the nudes lose their balance and topple into the cold river. It is very Seinfeldian — you mean shrinkage, like laundry?

Overall, the show is fresh, clean. This is due in part to the fact that this Biennial is the youngest thus far; the majority of the artists were born in the '60s and '70s.

Hong Zhang's youthful "Twin Spirits #2" catches your eye right away. Cascading 30 feet down the wall onto the floor is a waterfall self-portrait of the artist's and her twin's hair. The charcoal locks seem identical, but, as is probably the case with the sisters, as you approach subtle nuances are revealed. Light sinks into the piece and illuminates from below, highlighting individual strands like threads of black sunlight. You can smell the hint of new shampoo and wish you could bury your face in the miles of river-like hair.

Though there is no identifiable 2005 Biennial theme, several artists wove war into their work; all these pieces are grouped together in the affectionately nicknamed "War Room." The focal work here is a study in ritualistic contrast. Amos Scully's "Lotus Strike Out" is at once romantic and crude, flowing and blunt. An arm of rough-cut lumber comes to a dead stop in the soft rumples of a peach silk cape. Off the cape, a hoe-like steel clamp scoops up an edge. It is the past of traditional, natural materials evolving into modern, designer ones; it is the story of what surrounds us, what we use to construct havens of materialism.

The War Room is made uncomfortable by Joseph McVetty the Third. In a raspberry to our "bankrupt culture," his two paintings are the ones that no one will speak in front of. You watch people meander with comment to all the other works, then they stand in front of McVetty's, cover the eyes of their children, squint, and move on while clearing the bile from their throat. Naked, anorexic (some amputee) women with large blue-shadowed eyes hold each other down while placing razor blades to their clits, deliver babies with one hand while readying a gun in the other, and commit horrid acts of abuse to one another. In the neighboring piece, Spartan-like men with skull heads smash in the faces of pencil sketched cows, take large Xacto knives to their necks and hold up the severed heads in victory. Certainly you can have a psychological field day with these works, but one can say the lunacy and violence depicted here is not different from what is happening overseas.

The award for being most wonderfully creative goes to Diana Cherbuliez. While walking in the woods shortly after 9/11, she found a discarded copy of the engineering text, *Why Buildings Fall Down*. That was all she needed. In the 1000 hours that followed,



"EMMA," charcoal pencil on paper, by Nicole Stiffle.

she created one of the most impressive sculptures I have ever seen. Made from every *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle that she had worked on (in pen!) and saved since 1994, a semi-replica of the Tower of Babel was born. An incredible feat of origami, each puzzle is turned into an arched window, which chronologically winds up like a wedding cake. A folded photo from the style section blacks out the center of each window — the pupil of our culture. Like a giant sand castle, the piece sits in the middle of the room, not knowing what will bring its demise. The fragile paper sends a haunting call to the steel structures of the world, "What goes up, must come down."

Perhaps better than anything, trees can attest to that mantra. And Leah Gauthier acts as the trees' voice in her peaceful installation, "Born." I saw her constructing this work, and like labor, it looks painful. She first tapes blown up panels of a tree's cell structure to the wall. Then, she drills .0625" holes all along the pattern. After removing the paper, she tucks pine needles into the holes. The end result is a soft prayer to the life force of a tree.

I need to give an honorable shout-out to Donna Conlon whose socio-archaeological video of leaf cutter ants carrying peace signs and the flags of the 191 countries belonging to the United Nations is an extraordinary example of patience and endurance. God knows what gave her the idea to do this, but you can't help smiling as you watch. These ants are crazy! They just run back and forth, with no signs of slowing, with loads of leaves on their backs. Well, there are a few exceptions. Every so often you see a lazy ant riding on top of the leaf or flag. That would be me. PS: No leaf cutter ants were harmed in the making of this video.

The jurors did an excellent job of meshing drastically different works together so it feels as natural as a family reunion: These people will never all be in the same room together again, but for now Crazy Uncle Jed perches on the roof as prim cousin Selma coaxes him down with a smile on her face. And as most family reunions prove out, you will have an ass-load of fun, and the video to prove it. ■

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