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Voelz Chandler: A wide view of the West at MCA

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When the call for artists went out for the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver's 2005 biennial, it lacked something familiar from earlier efforts.

Missing was the concept of limiting submissions for the show to artists from Colorado, as director-curator Cydney Payton expanded the field to include Arizona, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. And missing now is the former subtitle "Beyond Comfort! Beyond Representation!" which mainly substituted exclamation points for sense.

But it's apparent, in the "2005 Biennial Blow Out" opening today, that even the phrase *Blow Out* could go. This show instead offers a highly selective view of art from Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona, the three states from which juror Kenny Schachter plucked 10 artists.

That's 10 from about 780 entries, the same number Payton chose from about 460 submissions for the 2003 biennial. But Payton allowed her 10 picks to follow suit: "2003 Colorado Biennial: 10+10" became a dual-step exhibition that found Payton choosing predominantly younger artists who, in turn, often chose veterans. It was a (mainly) bright and engaging snapshot of work being made here today.

With "Blow Out," however, I don't think that same statement can be made, and not just because artists from two other states are now in the mix. It may also have something to do with the fact that London-based Schachter brings a detached view to the field. (This is in direct opposition to the first MCA biennial, in 2000, for which long-ago director Mark Masuoka scoured studios around the state to bring in widely varying work from 15 Colorado artists.)

What Schachter chose is work that flirts with the idea of the West. There's a sense of loneliness in places, of the individual, of something sad and, finally, of being alone. Not in every piece, to be sure, but Schachter may have keyed in to some sort of regional vibe in what he saw (including what we don't see).

Or maybe not: Not every work in the biennial could by any stretch of the imagination conform to a regional aesthetic, and isolation is a theme with universal implications. Schachter, in the one paragraph of his statement released by MCA, notes only that staging an exhibition with fewer choices would "enable the participants to create more ambitious displays of their art."

But this is a *quiet* ambition, quiet throughout the show, which fills MCA's main level. (A separate show, Bert Payne's *I Will Smile for One Year*, fills the mezzanine.)

The first work encountered is a series of Louisa Armbrust's digital drawings that confront the off-kilter aspects of play. Her *Wrath of Balls*, especially, succeeds in turning inanimate objects - the balls used in various sports - into weapons of retaliation.

A different message comes from the four partial self-portraits installed on the wall opposite. Denver photographer Jason Patz records himself in a search for meaning and, perhaps, self-affirmation. They're satisfying in their sense of being both vulnerable and bold.

In galleries to the right of the entry are Susan Meyer's expansive installation *nude-topia* and a series of large-scale pinhole landscape photographs by Davie Sharpe.

Meyer's fanciful sculptural project, which grew out of a residency at PlatteForum, depicts tiny human figures inserted into suspended, layered platforms that recall a science-fiction tale of the aloneness of space.

One gallery over, pieces from Sharpe's "Eastern Plains Suite" draw a viewer into his special vision of the West, its land and its fickle weather (they, too, are familiar, from a recent show at Robischon Gallery).

Across from both spaces hangs work by Arizona-based Angela Ellsworth, who stitches portraits of friends in black thread onto paper napkins. The basic nature of the materials sets off the expressive strength of these small works.

In the main space is a series of ceramic sculptures by Jeff Starr, some also familiar from a recent show at Rule

Gallery, that includes almost fairy-land-like tree stumps, a regal monkey (the luster-glazed *Libertine*) and the eerie bust *David* (as in area artist David Brady). There, Starr's background as a painter truly shows through. Set off to one side is a series of moody **lenticular photographs** by New Mexico-based Sherlock Terry that force the viewer to walk back and forth to discover key content shifts reflected by this holographic technique.

Toward the back are Patti Hallock's photographs of a man-in-a-really-bad-red-suit in various solitary activities, including driving a car and pensively studying trees with pink leaves, and a right-on-the-wall piece by Jessica James Lansdon, of Arizona. Her *Superstition Mountain/the War Between the States* connects a harp's worth of red strings between cutout cactuses and the phrase *Can't Go Home Again*. The link between Western flora and Southern angst presents a surprising, if not totally clear, conceptual puzzle.

Finally, the most complicated piece in the biennial - and the only one incorporating video technology - is Arizona-based Denis Gillingwater's *Divisions/Divides/Distances*. Installed in the back café area, Gillingwater's piece combines small photographs of area buildings, monitors and cameras in a work that's site-specific in terms of local landmarks as well as what it photographs as a viewer walks by.

Except for the click-click of a metronome-like camera there and a soundtrack for Meyer's installation, this is a quiet biennial - in reality and in metaphor. As a show, it will prompt thought; as a biennial, it doesn't answer questions, just asks them.

2005 Biennial Blow Out

- What: Work by Louisa Armbrust, Patti Hallock, Susan Meyer, Jason Patz, David Sharpe and Jeff Starr, of Colorado; Angela Ellsworth, Denis Gillingwater and Jessica James Lansdon, of Arizona; and Sherlock Terry, of New Mexico
- When and where: 6 to 9 p.m. today, through Sept. 25; Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver, 1275 19th St.
- Of note: "The Aesthetic Picnic: Defining Vision," panel discussions by gallery owners and museum directors about the "museums of their minds," 10 a.m. to noon Saturday: at 10 a.m., gallery owners Dina Castillo, Jim Robischon, Robin Rule and Ivar Zeile, moderated by Monica Aiello; at 11 a.m., directors and curators Lisa Tamiris Becker, Dianne Vanderlip and Simon Zalkind, moderated by Adam Lerner. \$6, free to members, \$1 if you bring a dish for the community picnic at noon
- In conjunction: "I Will Smile for One Year," by Burt Payne³, opens today in three locations and variations: the mezzanine of MCA/Denver, and as ongoing off-site projects at the Denver Dry, 1555 California St., and in MCA/Denver's storefront operation at Denver International Airport
- Information: 303-298-7554; www.mcartdenver.org

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