



Bye-bye, Biennial, but many exhibits are showing through August

By **Michael Paglia** Thursday, Aug 26 2010

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The Biennial of the Americas has officially ended, but many of the associated exhibits are still running, in part because the Biennial was originally supposed to continue through August.

Last month, at the height of the festivities, I took the high road with my review of the three most important art shows associated with the Biennial — *The Nature of Things* at the McNichols building, *Energy Effects* at MCA Denver and *Objectophilia* at Capsule's temporary spaces — and recommended that everyone check them out ("First Time Out," July 15). *Energy Effects* is still open, and there's time to see two other shows as well.

The first is ***Covering Ground***, at Robischon Gallery, an official partner with the Biennial. This group photo show resonates nicely with *Energy Effects*, since two artists, **Gonzalo Lebrija** and **Jim Sanborn**, have work in both, with the subject at Robischon being movement.



"No. 4 'Bonneville' series," Gary Huibregtse, color photograph.



"Packages," Emma Hardy, brown paper and mixed materials.

The exhibit is installed in Robischon's annex, which was created when the **Center for Visual Art** moved out. Robischon is now connected to it by a doorway. That means the viewer enters *Covering Ground* in the small space given over to Lebrija's photos. Those images document Lebrija's performance "The Distance Between You and Me," in which he runs away from video cameras in a variety of settings. The conceptual content is palpable as the artist expresses time and distance while cramming in all kinds of emotive interpretations.

In the space to the right are a group of large photographs from **Gary Huibregtse's** series of portraits of **Bonneville** salt-flat racers. The results are very elegant, with a strong sense of composition and colors. There's a nice connection between the speed racers and the jet engines on projector screens by **Gary Emrich** in the space to the left. Interestingly, Huibregtse and Emrich are two of the four Colorado artists in the show, and their contributions are clearly among the standouts.

Another Colorado artist, **Chuck Forsman**, is better known as a painter, but he's also a noteworthy photographer. The small silver prints here continue Forsman's longtime interest in capturing the sights seen on highway road trips. As usual, despite the mundane character of his topic, he comes up with haunting and enigmatic pictures.

Kevin O'Connell, the last of the quartet of Coloradans, follows a similar approach in his photos. Hung in the large space, O'Connell's pigment prints depict details of structures related to energy production and imbue these ordinary subjects with content.

Sanborn (the other artist from *Energy Effects*) has displayed his diptychs from the "Penetrating Radiation" series. In each, he pairs an image of a projectile with a long-exposure image of it. Also worth looking at are Sanborn's photos documenting light projections that superimpose geometric patterns on constructed and natural landmarks. They're wild, and a great addition to the vocabulary of earth works.

Details

Covering Ground

Through August 28, Robischon Gallery, 1740 Wazee Street, 303-298-7788, www.robischongallery.com.

Perceptions

Through September 4, Walker Fine Art, 300 West 11th Avenue, #A, 303-355-8955, www.walkerfineart.com.

Perceptions, at Walker Fine Art, though not an official part of the Biennial, is an unauthorized response — and good for **Bobbi Walker** for having the guts to do it. Though Colorado artists were sprinkled through every one of the main exhibits, it was clear to Walker (and to a lot of other people) that the powers-that-be at the Biennial were trying to keep out the local art scene — not just artists, but a lot of galleries, too. The reason? Most of the members of the many advisory committees of the Biennial had no connection whatsoever with the art world in Colorado — and, I daresay, don't even know it exists. (More about this in a minute.)

To counteract this tendency, Walker put together a group show made up entirely of Colorado artists. I don't really think the show holds together, but the parts are greater than the whole, and there are some remarkable things here.

One of the included artists is **Lauri Lynnxe Murphy**, who also served as the curator of *Objectophilia*, another effort to include locals in the Biennial. At Walker, Murphy shows a group of computer-printed photos of plastic buildings paired with a great wall installation made of blobs of translucent acrylic mounted on wires. It's natural and unnatural at the same time, which, I guess, is the same thing you could say about the photos (and about **Kim Ferrer's** indoor take on the great outdoors).

I really liked the abstract wall installation by Sabin Aell, in which she uses pieces of billboards hung by thin colorful wire recycled from the phone company. Oddly enough, considering the materials, it has a classic modern look. That's also true of **John Murphy's** junk sculpture, a piece that is right up front but is actually an addendum to the show. Murphy has taken found metal containers and assembled them into a clever update of **John Chamberlain's** signature junk sculptures.

The tour de force, though, is the installation by **Emma Hardy**; in "Packages," Hardy has used brown paper to create hyper-realist versions of figures. While they are incredibly well done, the heartbeat soundtracks accompanying them are a bit gimmicky. Each person who provided the model for the sculptures had his or her heartbeat recorded. This visceral feature can be perceived by touching the figures.

These shows are worth seeing, even if the Biennial itself had problems. Denver tried its hand at hosting an event with international pretensions, and clearly, that hand folded quickly.

Despite all the cash and effort expended, the world did not come to Denver for the Biennial; in fact, it barely noticed. Worse still, the Biennial was hardly even recognized by most of the people who live here. It came and went quietly.

I believe the reason for this lack of excitement was because the event was not what we traditionally think of as a biennial — typically an art fair — but instead was a nebulous and uneasy combination of academic conference and art festival. There were too many themes; just about anything with some American content could be bent to qualify as part of it. And if nearly everything is a theme, then nothing is. On the other hand, the Biennial was too limited in its scope. By zeroing in on the Americas, many art events that went on this summer were needlessly left out of the festivities.

I'm tempted to say the problem with the Biennial was that it was a half-baked idea, but that would be wrong, since it was a catalogue of them. If I had to pinpoint the key deficit, though, it would be the almost complete disconnect with the actual cultural world that already exists here. By leaving out this essential component, there was nothing "Denver" about the event, so it was essentially meaningless from a local perspective. It could have been anywhere, so why have it here?

I'm not sure there will be a second biennial in 2012, but despite its false start this time, it really could be something big if only it were done the right way.

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