

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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THE EVERYDAY, TURNED ON EDGE

BLAKE GOPNIK

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John Lehr, a Baltimorean just finishing his master of fine arts degree at Yale, is a virtual unknown. His photographs have barely been shown. Hardly a word has been written about them. And his pictures are original, and very good.

That makes Lehr the ideal example for "Closer to Home," the latest version of the Corcoran Biennial of contemporary art, which opens today. It's the 48th edition of the exhibition, in which the Corcoran attempts to take the pulse of the American art world. Lehr's pictures fulfill the promise of discovery that every survey show holds out but few deliver on. No wonder he's been chosen for the cover of the exhibition catalogue. (His 30th birthday falls on the show's opening day: If he doesn't have a happy one this time, he never will.)

Lehr's color prints don't make an instant splash. They're big and superbly crisp, but they still start off feeling a little staid. His photos document dull stretches of highway or just-built suburban schools, using the foursquare, documentary manner of what's known as the "Vancouver School," after the influential color photographs of Vancouverite Jeff Wall. Then comes an "Aha!" that sets Lehr's work apart.

Right in the middle of every shot is a strange object that cuts through the vista beyond, as though a piece of minimalist sculpture had taken root in fresh suburban soil. Or maybe it's the monolith from Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" come to tempt Americans to space out again. A photo of a roadside parking lot is cut in two by a bar of black steel a good 20 feet tall. An unfussy picture of a banal, Colonial-style high school is interrupted by a "monolith" that's white on top, then brown around the middle and scarlet below.

Another photo, of a highway lookout onto a wooded panorama, is split in two by an upright bar or beam of steel that's painted forest brown.

At last recognition dawns: We're looking at modern roadside signage, but viewed edge-on. An object whose whole function comes from what it puts before your face is shown from an angle that makes it almost unrecognizable, and powerless to do its work.

Signage is so familiar to us that although we get to view only its slender edge, it's hard to keep its full-frontal effects from coming to mind. Even based on Lehr's slimmest of hints, it's easy to imagine the gas and sodas and burgers that are being touted. But that easy familiarity has something flabby about it, too. In the normal course of things, it keeps most signs from fully registering. By skewing our viewpoint, Lehr's art gives the commonplace an enigmatic charge. Despite their documentary feel, in some sense these images by Lehr are anti-documents. Though their crucial subject is right in the middle of the frame, no effort is made to spell out what it's all about. Lehr uses signs as reminders of the role they play in life but doesn't let them go ahead and play it.

Not all the work in the biennial is as absorbing as Lehr's. But every piece in the show is elegantly made, appealing to the senses and worth a moment's thought.

"We elected early on to let our eyes, as much as our intellects, guide the selection of artists," say curators Stacey Schmidt and Jonathan Binstock in their joint catalogue essay. They clearly have skilled eyes that are good at selecting winners -- and, as important, avoiding junk. The

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latest biennial doesn't really have a theme or take-home message, but it's a gracious, even-handed, attractive survey of what good art is like today.

The 15 artists chosen range from absolute beginners on the local scene to artists who are busy building larger reputations, with a few slightly bigger names -- Matthew Buckingham, George Condo -- thrown in. Four artists are from the Washington area, six work in New York, two in Los Angeles, two in Chicago and one in San Francisco. Five of the artists are women. One of those is black.

Schmidt and Binstock have chosen to do without the highest of computer tech. But this biennial's artists still work in a vast range of media: They've used video, projected slides, color photographs, soundtracks, daguerreotypes, sliced-up tires, trash, painted wood, traditional oil paints, cast fiberglass, silk embroidery, construction lumber, inflated vinyl and balled-up bits and bobs of thread -- and this for an art event that until five years ago was reserved almost entirely for painters. All this variety means that the show captures precisely how the art world feels right now. It's full of appealing work in any of a dozen or so recognizable styles. (Most of the biennial's artists can be pigeonholed alongside several others on the current scene.) There's no single trend or look or issue that stands out from the rest.

But the 48th Corcoran Biennial at least gives us a pile of engaging art to look at and think about while we wait for the next artquake.

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