

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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"The 48th Corcoran Biennial: Closer to Home," Mar. 19-June 27, 2005, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

It's all about politics in Washington, D.C. -- even at the art museums, as was recently demonstrated at the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Two weeks ago, the museum trustees voted to cancel plans for a \$170-million, shiny ribbon-style annex by Frank Gehry, which led in short order to the resignation of the museum's popularizing director, David C. Levy, who had come aboard back in 1991 after the Robert Mapplethorpe fiasco -- another cancellation, that one of a controversial exhibition.

Many had questioned Levy's judgment, especially after he championed one of the most bizarre spectacles in modern museum history, the Corc's show of walk-through 3D sculptures of classic Impressionist paintings by Band-Aid heir J. Seward Johnson. But apparently this was not the case for Olga Hirshhorn, the art collector and widow of museum founder Joseph Hirshhorn, who in the wake of Levy's ouster said that she was, in essence, cutting the Corc out of her will. All this political hullabaloo -- it now turns out that the museum needs \$50 million in overdue repairs as well -- makes one yearn for the days when it was the art that made the trouble. And thus, with a certain dispirited feeling, we turn to the subject at hand, the 2005 edition of the Corcoran Biennial.

Subtitled "Closer to Home" and organized by Jonathan Binstock and Stacey Schmidt, the exhibition includes 15 artists whose work "examines the flip side of the high-tech coin." That would be "low-tech" to all you bit-heads out there in cyberspace. Here, the curatorial umbrella shelters "earnest individual expression, historically resonant esthetic dialogue, the reinvention or revival of 'old tech' methods [and] the poetic use of prosaic materials." Sounds thrilling, doesn't it? The show actually opens with a bit of promise. In the rotunda a half-floor below the exhibition entrance is *Fall of Babylon*, an art-world parody of Christian revivalism by Reverend Ethan Acres featuring a large, pumpkin-headed figure that sermonizes (through earphones) about the evils of lust and drink, while inflated giant spiders in cages pulsate above whirring air machines and fabric reliefs of ravens ominously take wing along the circular walls. The question here is, of course, whether the devils to be driven out inhabit the present facility or reside further along Pennsylvania Avenue.

Upstairs, a certain funky note is sounded by Katherine Spence, who contributes paper towel rolls stitched with 19th century floral designs -- though Spence isn't from D.C., she has captured the town's sense of art as a deeply idle pastime. To be fair, her other works -- nest-like "threadpiles," related bird drawings and obsessive fabric-scrap accumulations -- are visually arresting.

Ever-so-slightly more to the political point is Austin Thomas's *Free-Form Perch*, a finely crafted, multi-tiered, organic wood bench placed in the center of a gallery and presumably intended for contemplation and social interaction. It looks rather out of place, though Thomas has some collages on a nearby wall that are exquisite -- quirky, boutonniere shapes pasted with confetti-like paper and grainy wood chip number charts. Representing the artist's studies for and musings on public art, these works are among the strongest in the show.

Several works reroute traditional abstraction through the computer. Monique van Genderen's bright abstractions, which have a retardataire, Jetsons-ish sense of fun, are clearly the result of a

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digital design process. Similarly, James Huckenpahler's abstract photographs, as well as the impressive silver sculpture by Inigo Manglano-Ovalle, which hangs from the ceiling like a biomorphic cloud, owe their otherworldly mysteries to science.

For the "real" painters -- those who use little more than brush, palette and their obsessive imaginations -- the biennial rather brilliantly pairs Dana Schutz and George Condo, both of whom have created their own dark, wacky worlds, so much like our own yet so much different. In Schutz's buoyantly acid-colored canvases, broad-faced, semi-abstract, choppy figures perform and encounter violence, dismemberment, gluttony and even cannibalism in lush landscapes. Much the senior artist, Condo's zany portraits incorporating puffy clouds, cartoon-ugly faces and startling corporeal transformations manage to attain an Old Master gravity of startling power. The low-tech concept extends to lens-based media, too, including two works that use fast-fading formats. Matthew Buckingham's *One Side of Broadway* is a slide show of black-and-white photographs documenting New York's Great White Way, accompanied by a monotonous, echo-y narration. Colby Caldwell's 8mm film clips, though digitalized, retain the scratchy feeling of a home movie. The five- or six-minute-long silent films start out as depictions of a young man, two young women (one singing), an old man, a child and a man walking a dog on a country lane, and end up as lingering ruminations on love, friendship and family.



John Lehr, *Untitled*, 2003/2004

Other artists in the show are Jeff Spaulding, whose Oldenburg-meets-Duchamp found object sculptures are wryly intelligent, subtly erotic and sometimes even nightmarish re-thinkings of toys and playthings; Richard Rezac, whose clean-edged, lacquered architectural sculptures have a Guber-esque quality of enigma; Adam Fuss, who contributes ten nearly identical daguerrotypes that render water drops as targets; and **John Lehr**, whose 30" x 38" color photos depict urban landscapes and city views in a way that is reminiscent of both Lee Friedlander and William Eggleston. Here, the notion of "closer to home" seems to mean back to basics.

I've saved my favorite for last the very big, black wall sculpture at the far end of the ground floor atrium. Bingo! It's *Acid Rain*, Chakaira Booker's towering 9 x 16 ft. agglomeration of wildly swirling sections of bicycle tire, a sculpture that gets better and better the closer one gets to it. There's just something about a carefully arranged mass of ragged black rubber that says "Washington, D.C." SIDNEY LAWRENCE is an artist and writer living in Washington, D.C.

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