

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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THE CORCORAN IN EARNEST

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"THE 48TH CORCORAN Biennial: Closer to Home" isn't just relatively unplugged as compared to the previous two biennials, which involved considerably more of what is generically called "new media" these days. It's also, ostensibly, an irony-free zone.

"Earnest" is the word of the day, according to co-curators Jonathan Binstock and Stacey Schmidt, who have organized a 15-artist survey that isn't just quieter and less wired than the recent past but that feels not only smaller (which isn't necessarily a bad thing) but diminished, which is.

Those who have been paying attention to the Washington art scene will be either pleased or dismayed (or, as I was, a little bit of both) by the inclusion of four artists with ties to the area, each of whom deserves the wide exposure such an exhibition affords, but two of whose work feels like substantial reiterations of recent commercial gallery shows, even though many of the pieces are technically new.

Don't get me wrong. When I reviewed James Huckenpahler's gorgeous digital prints (based on computer-manipulated human portraiture) at Fusebox, and Colby Caldwell's sorrowful and somehow quaint DVD installations (based on movies shot with an antique Super-8 camera) at Hemphill Fine Arts, I fairly raved. I'll rave again: Go see them, if you haven't already. If you have, oh well. The addition of low-tech, pencil-and-ink drawings by Huckenpahler, evoking the artist's magnificent computer-generated "landscapes," may fit the down-home theme of the exhibition, but they add nothing to the main event, nor do they do much to undercut the been-there-done-that feeling.

Baltimorean **John Lehr** is a revelation, at least to me, and his unassuming photographs of public signage -- viewed from the side, so as to obliterate whatever it is they're selling you or warning you of -- are a treat, albeit one so subtle it almost escapes notice. And while Washington stalwart Jeff Spaulding, who came in second last year in the Trawick Prize contemporary art competition, has several pieces on view that have been shown before, there's enough new stuff here to keep me from complaining. The artist, who calls himself a kind of "hunter," often reconfiguring ordinary scavenged objects by the merest of physical tweaks, has included one sculpture in particular here that is worth the price of admission. Called "Alarm," it appears to be a figure of an alien creature in panic mode, but is actually a plush, stuffed Tweety Bird toy that Spaulding rescued from the side of the road and turned backward and upside down. Like all of Spaulding's work, there's something familiar and terrifying about its suggestion of innocence and horror.

I said earlier that "Closer to Home" was an irony-free zone. That's not entirely true, or at least it doesn't always feel that way. Sure, Kathryn Spence's sweet miniaturized drawings of nature, balls of colored thread and embroidered paper towels have no smirking subtext, but it's not so obvious with, say, the Rev. Ethan Acres.

The stepson of a Baptist preacher, and himself a real ordained minister ("real" in the sense that, like Joey on "Friends," he bought his ordination from a mail-order church), Acres is a Los Angeles-based street preacher and performance artist who plans to open, in the next month or so, the Church of the Holy Fool in L.A. Filling the Corcoran's Rotunda at the moment are several goofy inflated sculptures depicting crows inside golden cages -- an overly obvious metaphor for the bad thoughts we all harbor -- as well as a pumpkin-headed mannequin of the good reverend with headphones snaking out his mouth on which visitors can listen to a recording of the "sermon" he delivered to the opening-night art crowd on the topic of lust and other vices. Some viewers will

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undoubtedly see him as a blasphemer, while others will think they get the "joke," but it's highly doubtful whether many will buy into his total sincerity.

Of course, it's that very inscrutability that makes this piece, which seems to offer if not ironic at least wry commentary on the museum as a kind of church, so perversely -- although maybe not aesthetically -- satisfying.

I'm not sure what the difference is between "wry" and "ironic" commentary anyway, but it is merely wry commentary, at least according to Binstock and Schmidt's wall text, that Monique van Genderen's "paintings" offer the viewer on the subject of "painting." And have you noticed how I can't seem to stop with the air quotes? I have to call van Genderen's art "paintings" because they're only part paint. The rest is adhesive vinyl laminate that makes them look like a cross between Matisse cut-outs and Colorforms. While it's true, as Binstock notes, that "it's hard to be a painter and be too cynical," it's also hard these days to be one and be too sincere. Every act of picking up a brush (or a piece of vinyl) nowadays is fraught with several hundred years of art history.

Time was when this biennial was known as the Corcoran Biennial of Contemporary American Painting, so it's nice to see George Condo and Dana Schutz, real painters who seem to at least have fun pushing the stuff around the canvas, even if I'm not certain what these misshapen clowns (Condo) and gigantic children's drawings (Schutz) mean.

Chakaia Booker's "Acid Rain," a massive, 16-foot-long, 9-foot-tall assemblage made of rubber tires has real punch -- and grace. In a similar vein, one of Adam Fuss's daguerreotypes of water ripples registers as pretty, but a room full of them, as has been installed here, is pretty awesome. At the other extreme, Matthew Buckingham's slide show of 84 city blocks' worth of buildings along the east side of Broadway is just soporific, as are Inigo Manglano-Ovalle's titanium-clad cloud, sculptor Richard Rezac's minimalist confections and Austin Thomas's glorified picnic benches.

In these cases, a little less old-fashioned earnestness, and a little more new-fangled irony, might not hurt.

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