

Biennial Fail: Making It Make Sense

by Susannah Schouweiler on October 25, 2013



*Installation view, " , , , " the third Minnesota biennial at the Soap Factory
(all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)*

MINNEAPOLIS — Unlike similarly named convocations in Venice or New York or Sao Paulo, Minnesota's biennial art exhibitions have little to do with market vogue or value. These shows take stock of trends, maybe, but amount to little more than a (usually) thoughtful regional survey — an occasion for self-congratulation and a bit of harmless curatorial grandstanding.

In recent years, the Soap Factory in Minneapolis has hosted three of these biennial showcases. The current iteration, on view now in the gallery's rangy, repurposed industrial space, was curated by John Marks and David Petersen. They've titled it , , , — in a show of defiance against legibility, I presume.

Marks and Petersen used to run a high-minded, non-profit, artists-first exhibition space in Minneapolis, called Art of This, which presented work by beguiling but inscrutable artists. Petersen currently runs a commercial gallery of his own with much the same vibe. Both curators are influential fish in our small art pond, respected as benefactors and sharp-eyed talent scouts for up-and-coming Very Serious Artists.

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*Allen Brewer and Pamela Valfer, "Ad infinitum" (detail) (2013),
graphite on venetian plaster, wood, carpet flooring, dimensions variable*

In their introductory catalogue essay, the two call this “ostensibly untitled” biennial “the speechless epilogue of a story written between 2005 and 2010” — a transposition of their old Art of This collaboration onto the site of the Soap Factory. With contributions from 38 visual artists, writers, musicians, and dancers, it’s a crowded field. Beyond selecting the artists, the curators opted to take a distinctly hands-off role, leaving the execution of and communications about their show largely in the hands of its participants. At one of the panel discussions about the exhibition (which were conceived and led, not by the curators, but as the contribution of Andy Sturdevant), one of the artists mentioned that even the exhibition’s installation was handled with little or no curatorial editing or oversight. Artists were largely left to their own devices to choose work and organize their pieces in the Soap Factory’s sprawling rooms, haggling among themselves for the best real estate.

The gallery’s executive director, Ben Heywood, says that “with some of the larger works or pieces with more complex installation the platform of negotiation and compromise between artists was nudged more proactively by [the curators].” But, generally speaking, “the aim was to bring the communitarian aesthetic of Art of This into a more formal context (not necessarily the Soap Factory itself, but the concept of a ‘biennial’).” In that spirit, artists were urged to remain open to experimentation during the run of the show, to embrace uncertainty and risk, and to treat “the gallery as an extension of the studio.” A Zen-like dictum shows up a number of times in the exhibition materials: “Trust the platform.”

It’s an intriguing experiment, but that’s not the same thing as a well-executed exhibition of contemporary regional practice. The resulting arrangement of work, and the experience of seeing it, is predictably hectic, even random. There’s no legible thread to parse. Some of the pieces are finished objects; others are artifacts and media documentation leftover from projects gone by. All is presented without commentary or explanation. . . . reads like a co-op show.

There’s little practical difference between radical accessibility and stubborn silence. Openness is not the same thing as invitation. The expressed aim is that . . . be an “exhibiting” that reveals its content and purpose over the two-month run, in repeated gallery visits, engagement with ephemeral performance and music events, and the various panels. But from all available evidence, the curators are simply uninterested in engaging the casual gallery-goer. The show’s a grab bag with little evident intention connecting its constituent parts into anything like a coherent whole.

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What's a curator for, if not to build a bridge between artists and audience? I understand the resistance to aesthetic prescriptions, and I can appreciate bucking the tendency toward puffery, or the unmerited authority of impenetrable didactics that claim to speak for the work. But must conceptually driven art stand bereft of *any* storytelling at all? This sort of absentee leadership serves neither artist nor viewer well. It's a hedge against criticism disguised as conscientious objection to the status quo. A cop-out. There's so much on view in this exhibition, and so little sense to its organization in the gallery, that the most resonant, internally coherent pieces lay claim to your attention immediately. In the absence of contextual threads by which to engage the quieter or less fully realized stuff, it's hard to get any traction on it. It's a ruthless, Darwinian way to present art. Then again, maybe that's the case with all group exhibitions, and this one's just more transparent in its winner-take-all ethos.

Two video works, close to the entrance, rise above the fray. Nate Young's wry and mesmerizing short "Soul Clap" shows disembodied white-gloved hands — two pairs of them, silently clapping in and out of sync in not-quite-predictable rhythms — floating against a black background. The related audio piece is distant from the video, placed at the back of a far-flung gallery room. Scott Nedrelov's large, framed video projection of a novel being read in real time — Ben Lerner's lyrical and funny *Leaving the Atocha Station* — is surprisingly sticky, too. Watch for a minute and before you know it, you're deep in the prose alongside our unseen reader, following as the pages are turned.

The rough-hewn room-within-a-room of Andrew Mazorol and Tynan Kerr's painted wooden hut offers a welcome respite from the hodge-podge, a fort-cum-Jungian dreamscape. Inside the structure you find what looks to be ritual space and each object choice heavy with inchoate intention. Stylized, faceless figures in a dramatic pair of paintings, totemic sculptural pieces of ornately decorated hands and masks are arranged on the walls, around the perimeter of the interior space. The floor is painted with a repeating pentagram pattern; the melancholy dissonance of a stuck chord on an old electronic keyboard cuts the air around you. It's eerie and a little gimmicky and downright irresistible.

Broc Blegen's painstaking re-creation of Allen Ruppersberg's 2010 conceptual work "Big Trouble" dominates the back gallery. Scrooge McDuck comic cut-outs, excised from their paper strips and writ large, are printed on freestanding plywood sculptures — droll, Disney-fied monuments to greed and market-first systems of value. This work, in particular, cries out for some good curatorial context. All but the surface of Blegen's work is lost on a viewer unfamiliar with the artist's obsession for collection through re-creation. Without that crucial information, without being privy to the *why* behind this young artist's museum-quality knock-offs, even an otherwise attentive viewer will miss out on the nuances: his dry commentary on inequitable access to art, on privilege and ownership, on what it means to become intimate with another's creation.

In an adjacent room is a magnificent pile of soiled white linens. Actually, it's a mile-long stretch of medical felt, part of the two-mile length of fabric used last year by RO/LU to create a Christo-esque path at High Desert Test Site in Joshua Tree, California. The story of that project is a wonderfully interesting one. Too bad it's not told here.

With the exception of a pamphlet discreetly placed by the gallery door that maps the show and relates artists and titles, the work stands alone, mute. You can buy a handsomely printed exhibition catalogue for \$16; there's a limited-edition LP for sale as well, featuring the musicians' contributions. But don't

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bother looking in these auxiliary pieces for substantive context or background information. The catalogue's writing includes unedited snippets of transcribed conversations between artists and curators, and intriguing but inside-baseball sorts of think pieces on the vagaries of biennials and the nature of exhibition programming. These act like liner notes to the show, primarily of interest to those already well-versed in the featured artists' bios and bodies of work.



RO/LU, "Here There Then, Here There Now" (2011/2013), one mile of medical fabric used previously to create path at High Desert Test Site, Joshua Tree, CA, dimensions variable

As you'd expect, reviews of this third biennial have been mixed. The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune's* art critic, Mary Abbe, acknowledges the idealistic ethos of the project, but after simply listing the objects on view, with special mention for a few standouts, she expresses frustration with the conceit of the show, declaring the results to be "a wan and empty gesture."

I was talking with an artist friend about Abbe's scathing assessment. She made an apt point, saying: "The curators didn't have to load the exhibition with intention or narrative, or even any explanation at all. But if [the biennial is really just] a snapshot of current practice, and all Petersen/Marks are doing is *showing* us that snapshot, then it's fair game to say it looks like what it is: 'a bunch of stuff in some room.'"

And that's it exactly: if, as a curator, you're not interested in lighting a way into the work you've gathered, then it's churlish to blame a viewer for not seeing beyond the surface. Before you ask me to "trust the platform," it would be helpful to define it.

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