

Minnesota Biennial features 38 state artists at Soap Factory in Minneapolis

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Updated: September 12, 2013 - 3:08 PM

Art biennials are coveted career launching pads. Decades after winning a spot in the Whitney Museum's New York biennial, artists will proudly tout it on their résumés. Ditto the biennials of Venice, Seoul, São Paulo, Istanbul and other chichi venues. That's because biennials traditionally are places at which savvy curators spot talent, collectors snap up new art and other artists eye potential trends.

None of this is likely to occur in the wake of “, , ,” the Minnesota Biennial in its third incarnation at the Soap Factory in Minneapolis through Nov. 3.

Yep. That title is, if read aloud, “Comma, Comma, Comma.” Given how lackluster the display is, the name might better be recast as “Coma, Coma, Coma.”

Aside from a few promising pieces, the exhibit part of the biennial — which includes periodic performances not reviewed here — is largely a shabby collection of apparently unfinished, unfocused and occasionally sullen detritus. Photographer Adam Caillier, for example, fixed his banal monochrome prints to the wall by sticking pushpins into the center of each image, a jokey gesture in defiance of tradition that reads like peevish self-mutilation.

The show includes an enormous tangle of fabric piled up not far from an old-fashioned film projector beaming images apparently recorded by shining a flashlight on leaves and bricks. There's a tall dented silvery column, a wedge of some Ikea-style flooring that may or may not allude to Carl Andre's minimalist floor sculptures from the 1970s, a quilt-like painting, a pair of painted boxes with an attached white-painted crustacean in a metal cage, color photos of hiding animals, a pair of punching bags, an excellent video of hands clapping and a not-so-fabulous video of people making truncated dance moves. Plus a do-it-yourself-popcorn stand. With free popcorn and a microwave oven.

There's also a hearty schedule of artist panels, in-gallery dance performances, an Improvised Music Series and multimedia events. A slender, nicely produced catalog of pictures and excerpts from rambling, occasionally coherent artist interviews, plus a limited-edition LP, are available (\$16 each; \$30 catalog and LP combo).

The artists were corralled for the biennial by John Marks and David Petersen, veteran Minneapolis gallery operators in their mid-30s. As in most biennials, the curators were given free rein to choose artists according to their own criteria. In this case, they were picked as a “representation of the artists we are interested in at the moment,” Marks said in a recent interview.

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The curators' goals were minimal, and they have succeeded in their aspirations. They wanted the show to be an open forum and extension of the artists' studios, a place where process prevailed over product and everyone was comfortable with "uncertainty and risk."

A few noteworthy pieces rise to attention. Nate Young's video of white-gloved hands, clapping rhythmically and silently in a black void, is mesmerizing. Extraordinarily expressive and precise, the hands imply the invisible bodies to which they're attached and the circumstances in which such clapping occurs, from music and dance performances to religious ceremonies and sporting events. Like white words on a black page, the hands are a language in themselves.

Scott Nedrelow's video of a book being read is engrossing. Presented on a large, framed screen, the words entice the eye, their references tease the mind, and then a hand turns the page. Unfolding in real time, his "reading" is a poetic and persuasive tribute to literature, language and thought.

A seven-sided meditation-or-dance hut that Andrew Mazorol and Tynan Kerr knocked up from found lumber is also intriguing. Decorated inside with quasi-ethnic masks and hand-shaped sculptures, it has a striped floor and walls ornamented with newsy scenes from a fictive culture. Its rough-hewn construction evokes an imagined world, distant but strangely familiar.

The room-sized fabric ball by RO/LU (Mike Brady and Matt Olson) carries a nice back story as a relic from a Christo-like 2012 performance the duo staged in the California desert, where they unrolled two miles of the fabric and then rolled it up again. At the Soap Factory, imaginative types might envision the ball as the top of a monstrous subterranean ice cream cone, or as discarded bandages from the vicious sunburn Olson documents in an accompanying videotape, or just as a fanciful exercise in scale shifting.

Broc Blegen's nearby sculptural installation of Scrooge McDuck characters based on a 1952 comic about greed and public art seemed to be hilariously topical satire. But I was wrong. I didn't realize, until told by the curators, that Blegen was merely copying an earlier work by another artist, Allen Ruppersberg. Apparently, Blegen is another in that long line of recent artists (Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince) whose careers are based on "appropriation" or deadpan copying of others' art. Kudos to Disney's cartoonists for lampooning fat cats, and to Ruppersberg for resurrecting their work. But it was a huge letdown to learn that Blegen's piece is a third-generation homage to someone else's creativity.

Like so much of this biennial, it was just a wan and empty gesture.

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