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GALLERY VIEW

GALLERY VIEW; TWO BIENNIALS: ONE LOOKING EAST AND THE OTHER LOOKING WEST; WASHINGTON

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Once again it's the season for biennials, those big curatorial follies in which museums marshall talent from around the country to report on the state of contemporary art. Here in Washington, no less than two biennials are holding forth: the Hirshhorn Museum's minibi, "Directions 1983" (through May 15), and the Corcoran Gallery's larger spread, "Second Western States Exhibition/The 38th Corcoran Biennial Exhibition of American Painting" (through next Sunday). In New York, the Whitney Museum's "1983 Biennial Exhibition" has just opened, as has the National Academy of Design's "158th Annual Exhibition." Curators grumble about the time spent in organizing them; artists fear exclusion from them and, even if included, complain that the work selected represents them badly; critics feel stampeded by the onslaught of art they present. And they are often less than enlightening for viewers. Yet the hallowed biennial tradition goes on.

The function of these salon shows - in an era before art magazines or other systematic sources of art information existed - was not only to give local audiences a "representative" view of contemporary American art (which didn't, and usually still doesn't, include the avant-garde), but also to "do something" for artists themselves, who then as now were clamoring for museum recognition. Generally, the shows were picked by prestigious jurors from submissions by artists, and various categories of prizes were awarded.

But the big shows have changed in recent years. For one thing, although they're still referred to as "biennials," their appearances may be irregular, as are the Hirshhorn's and the Guggenheim's in New York. For another, in most (not the National Academy's), the jury system has been scrapped in favor of an invitational approach, and prizes are no longer awarded. And the ease with which current art may be viewed elsewhere today has tended to shrink the biennials in scale and ambition; museums no longer feel compelled to present the broad survey. The juryless biennials they mount strongly reflect the individual tastes of curators or directors.

The Hirshhorn's "Directions," for example, the third in a series begun in 1979 to "provide a showcase for recent developments in the visual arts," was not designed as a national survey. Stated modestly by Abram Lerner, the Hirshhorn's director, the idea is to define "a selected group of directions or tendencies at work that, in the opinion of a single curator, appear worth noting." This year, the very New York-oriented show of some 40 works by 17 artists was organized by Phyllis D. Rosenzweig, associate curator, around four themes or "directions."

On the other hand, the Corcoran's show - confined, as always, to paintings alone - looks away from New York to the West, as the first in a series of biennials that the museum says will be "geographically defined." Organized by Clair List, associate curator for contemporary art in conjunction with the Western States Arts Foundation of Santa Fe, it boasts slightly more than 100 works by 30 artists who live and work in the states of

Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Texas, Utah and Washington. But we'll get back to the Corcoran in a minute.

In her catalogue for the Hirshhorn show, Miss Rosen@zweig says she has used the exhibition's format to focus on "a series of issues in contemporary art that seem to be of importance today and on selected artists whose work seems to exemplify these issues in an interesting and important manner." She divides the issues, with an obligatory bow to the difficulties of compartmentalizing contemporary work, into four sections: "Melodrama," images drawn from media and popular culture - television, movies, cheap novels and so forth; "Expressionisms" (sic), including those artists whose styles are "personally expressive" in terms of color, paint application, etc.; "From the Model," in which cues are taken from the sculptural qualities of associated arts, such as architecture, clothing and furniture, and "Real Space/Illusion," dealing with the exploration of how we "perceive our surroundings."

Although carping has been heard in Washington over the New Yorkness of the Hirshhorn show, Miss Rosenzw@eig sees the Big Apple as "where it's at. There were certain artists whose impact I had to acknowledge," she says. Sure enough, from Manhattan she's rounded up the usual suspects: Julian Schnabel, Cindy Sherman, Jonathan Borofsky, David Salle and Robert Longo; plus Ida Applebroog, Alexis Smith, Scott Burton, Elizabeth Murray, Judith Shea, Anita Thacher and Elyn Zimmerman. (Note the preponderance of women.) Of the other artists in the show, three - Mary Jones, Pierre Picot and Robert Wilhite - live in Los Angeles; one, Siah Armajani, lives in Minneapolis, and another, a woman with the unlikely name of Kendall Buster, is a Washingtonian.

Yet it's the relatively unknown Miss Buster who, in the "Real Space/Illusion" section, contributes the most interesting work in the show, a playful but unsettling room installation in bold Constructivist colors that uses planes to create spatial illusions. Diagonal strings, flat "field paintings," casement windows with frames warped in false perspective, are cleverly deployed to disorient the viewer, their effects enhanced by lights and shadows and emblematic signs, including the sinister figure of a hatted man framed in a window. It's a tour de force. Also in this section is a more magisterial, but less interesting architectural walkthrough by Elyn Zimmerman, in which space is broken up by metal grilles, masonry walls and big triangular partitions echoed by shadows and floor beds of gravel. Anita Thacher's installation is a dark room in which blown-up slides of persons and objects in spatial flux are projected to catchy music by David Byrne. But this viewer has seen effects such as these more interestingly achieved in the round.

In the "Melodrama" category with which the show begins, the freshest work is Alexis Smith's collage series, "Christmas Eve, 1943," in which, by witty visual play with lines from trashy thriller-writers - say Mickey Spillane and James M. Cain - she catches the, well, trashy yearnings of the period's pop culture. Other works here are more familiar: Robert Longo's black-and-white movie-scale drawings of individuals frozen in freaky postural displays; David Salle's "layered" paintings that juxtapose random images; the self-posed tabloid heroines of Cindy Sherman's large color photographs, and Ida Applebroog's cartoony drawings of soapopera situations.

Two canvases by Elizabeth Murray, in the "Expressionisms" area, the best work in this section, are put together of fragments, seemingly "exploded" by force of their exuberant color and energetic abstract imagery. But the entries by Julian Schnabel, one replacing a work that was withdrawn, seem to lack the usual Schnabel elan. Jonathan Borofsky's gag entries are a giant ruby painted on a blank field, and a droopy still-life canvas exhibited off the wall in its protective covering of plastic film and bubble wrap. Of Pierre Picot and Mary Jones, he figurative, she abstract, let's simply say that their work adds nothing to the luster of the emotive school it represents.

In the catchall "From the Model" section, Siah Armajani's imaginative and beautifully crafted "investigations" of house parts such as doors and windows are worth lingering over, and Scott Burton's massive "Granite Settee," a bench made of polished granite blocks, is both monumental and sittable. A fast look will do, however, for Judith Shea's clothing parts, some of real material, some painted on shaped canvas, and Robert Wilhite's hotel room setting, "Otis Suite," with its play on Bauhaus-y furniture.

If we accept the Hirshhorn's modest standard of selections "worth noting" by a single curator, I suppose we could say this flawed show works, even though the choices made by Miss Rosenzweig to fit her well-chosen themes are very uneven. And if there had to be an Old Master representation of Schnabel, Salle, Longo et al., it could have been balanced with more and fresher talent. Yet she's drawn our attention to some arresting work.

Meanwhile, at the Corcoran, there reigns a wild and funky abundance. The exhibition, actually a promotion for its regional artists by the Western States Arts Foundation, a coalition of arts councils of 10 Western states, is meant to emphasize the difference between art of the East and the West. It celebrates, according to Clair List, its organizer - who chose the show on her own with the foundation's cooperation - "the underlying spirit of qui@rkiness, comic vivacity and authentic gusto out West." These artists - of whom only three are women - are imbued with a "sense of place," she suggests, and their work is "peppered with their region's traditions and heritages, its popular and frontier culture, its celebrated light and palette, much of which has been laced with a stunning sense of wit."

It's a very lively show, all right, but the question is whether the sensibility here is as Western as Miss List makes out. Despite its reputation, New York isn't all solemn heavies.

We have our own "Western" artists: Red Grooms, Claes Oldenburg, Peter Saul, Richard Artschwager, Susan Hall, to name a few. And a number of this show's entrants are well known in the East - Peter Alexander (who paints on velvet just as Julian Schnabel does), Charles Arnoldi, Joan Brown, Robert Colescott, Laddie John Dill and Raymond Saunders. Even if their particular approaches fit Miss List's definition of "Western," there are others in the show who can't be distinguished from our own practitioners: Ron Hoover, who creates sinister human shadows by throwing oil paint at figures collaged on canvas; John E. Buck, whose canvases embellished with ghostly geometric shapes are "echoed" by jiggly structures placed before them, and James Hueter, represented by a series of small abstractions of wonderfully delicate color and surface.

Among the few here who deal particularly with Western subjects, Joe Baker, Theodore J. Waddell and R. Lee White, an Indian, stand out. Mr. Baker, from Arizona, contributes "Chief Picklecloud," a large, sportive painting of a dog in gaudy Indian headdress; Mr. Waddell, a Montanan, does dense, dark paintings of livestock notable for their expressive brushwork; and Mr. White, of Plains ancestry but living in New Mexico, gives a lovely, abstract contemporaneity to Indian pictographic signs and symbols.

There are enough here, too, who fit Miss List's standards of "quirkiness, comic vivacity and authentic gusto," not traits confined to the West. They include David Bates, painting black subjects in the folk-art manner of Horace Pippin; Mr. Colescott, who is no great shakes as a technician but treats hilariously such subjects as "Shirley Temple Black and Bill Robinson White"; Gaylen Hansen, another primitive in style, whose strong, joyous painting of a leaping fish makes the heart leap, too, and Masami Teraoka, a Japanese living in Hawaii, who does marvelously amusing contemporary takeoffs on 19th-century ukioye prints.

On the one hand, this very engaging and well-installed show is - at least quantitatively - a step forward for the Corcoran, in that its last two biennials were limited to five artists each, and very Big Names at that. On the other hand, the notion of returning to the concept of "regional" art seems disturbingly provincial. Why paste the artists of energy and vitality in this show with a Western label?

Illustrations: photo of 'Ed Walker Cleaning Fish' photo of 'Directions 1983'