

Texas Biennial: 36 artists, 5 galleries, one blockbuster?

Brushed with greatness

Exhibit taps into trend of every-other-year events highlighting hot new art

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Biennials -- they're the new blockbusters.

For the past 30 years the art world buzzed about gargantuan exhibits that drew record-setting crowds. Now a different event sets art aficionados all aflutter.

The biennial -- an every-other-year temporary exhibit that's meant to be an authoritative or official snapshot of the newest and best art.

OK, some such exhibits happen every three years or, like the massive German-based Documenta, every five years. And to be sure, warhorses such as the Venice Biennale (founded in 1893) and the biennial show started by New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1930s are established attention-getters.

But, more than ever, temporary, event-oriented shows laced with plenty of parties are what the crowds want -- in places such as Istanbul, Turkey; Moscow; Sao Paulo, Brazil; and Shanghai, China.

Last week, the Lone Star State welcomed a biennial right here in Austin. Not organized by large, well-established institutions like most biennials are, the Texas Biennial was put together by alternative, noncommercial galleries that are run by enterprising twentysomething and thirtysomething artists and curators.

Through the end of the month, the work of 36 artists from 12 Texas cities is spread out among five independent galleries.

That doesn't surprise some art observers.

"Austin's enjoying a power surge of art energy," says Dana Friis-Hansen, executive director of the Austin Museum of Art. "I give a lot of credit to a handful of dedicated people who have started scrappy shoestring spaces to get good young art seen."

Technically, this is the third such event for the Lone Star State. Houston's Contemporary Art Museum hosted a Texas Triennial in 1988. Dallas Artists Research & Exhibition launched a biennial in 1993. But neither was repeated.

"We had been thinking about organizing a statewide exhibit of new art for a while," says Arturo Palacios, gallery director of the City of Austin-owned Dougherty Arts Center. Palacios, who along with his counterparts at Gallery Lombardi, Bolm Studios, Camp Fig Gallery and the Eastside Artists Co-op began brainstorming last summer. "Nobody was using the 'Biennial' title here in Texas. And the word has cachet; it gets attention. So we figured it would get our exhibition attention."

It has. Just as biennials everywhere attract larger and larger crowds, they attract more and more opinionated discourse as well.

Heaping praise or criticism on the Venice Biennale and the Whitney Biennial has long been required of any art critic -- or art aficionados wanting to retain their professional reputation. This alternative Texas Biennial is no different. As

Houston artist and critic Bill Davenport, who served as one of the show's 15 jurors, says, the show is "a gripe magnet."

It started the minute the call for entries went out. Internet art chat rooms blazed with complaints about the preponderance of Austin curators (five of the jurors are from Austin) and the \$30 entry fee (most group exhibits include an entry fee, and with no corporate or public money, the Texas Biennial is entirely self-funded).

Still, that didn't stop more than 600 artists from 99 Texas cities from sending in their slides.

Then in January, the list of the chosen 36 was announced and the art crowd yammered anew.

J.R. Compton, editor of DallasArts Revue.com, has devoted an area on his Web site to biennial opinions, starting with his own. Calling the large number of jurors "absurd," he adds, "I was also upset that no Dallas or Fort Worth jurors were selected, with too many from Austin."

However, artist and University of Texas-Arlington professor Benito Huerta was a juror. Also, seven of the 36 artists included are from the greater Dallas-Fort Worth region.

Organizers of the show defend their methods. "I don't see any overwhelmingly negative aspects for too many curators," says Lubbock artist Jeffrey Wheeler, who served as a Texas Biennial juror. "If anything, it insured that our narrow personal aesthetics had a voice, but didn't become the voice of the show."

Those attending one of the five opening parties last week appeared to like the alternative approach, too. "This is a refreshing and fresh seeing exhibit," said Madelon Umlauf, artist and daughter of the late famed sculptor Charles Umlauf. "It's showing us a selection of art that was chosen by a whole new, young set of eyes."

Friis-Hansen says really, any chatter is productive: "All the griping is good if it makes us sharper lookers and thinkers. And any event that gets lots of people up off their seats and out into five different galleries is good for Austin and the Texas artists that are featured."

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FROM BOX

'Texas Biennial'

When: Through March 30

Where:

Dougherty Arts Center, 1110 Barton Springs Road, 397-1468.

Hours: 9 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Fridays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays.

Camp Fig, 305-B E. Fifth St., 698-0352. Hours: 2 to 8 p.m. Saturdays.

Gallery Lombardi, 910 W. Third St., 481-1088. Hours: noon to 6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays

Bolm Studios, 5305 Bolm Rd. No. 10, 385-1670. Hours: 2 to 6 p.m. Wednesdays, 2 to 8 p.m. Saturdays

Eastside Artist Co-op, 2109 E. Cesar Chavez St., 423-2063. Hours: noon to 9 p.m. Saturdays.

Tickets: Free, www.texasbiennial.com

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