

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

## Stroke of cooperative genius enlivens massive showcase

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Jim Morris ventures into an organic world with his "Piece of Mind" series.



DeWitt Godfrey's site sculpture is a perfect fit for the Albright-Knox's 1901 gallery.

Reach for the stars, exhorts the old saw, and you just might get stardust on your fingertips.

But human history says otherwise. Nobody's taken a count, but there must be hundreds - maybe thousands - of crazily ambitious projects that fall flat on their faces for every one that has even marginal success. Think of the

8-track, exploding dirigibles, collapsing suspension bridges, New Coke, the Edsel, and that now-dead guy who braved a hurricane in a canoe. The line between great wonder and great blunder is perilously thin.

When things go awry, people who analyze such things blame it on a lack of "uncertainty management." I'm not sure how much the organizers of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's "Beyond/In Western New York 2005" managed the multiple uncertainties of this immense, first-time collaborative project of regional art, but whatever they did, it worked. And quite marvelously.

Now that it's up and running in all 11 venues, this far-reaching event has elevated the tired idea of a regional biennial to new, extravagant heights. Albright-Knox Director Louis Grachos thought big when he was casting about for a way to revamp the biennial idea in Buffalo. His notion - simple on the surface but tremendously complicated in the working out - was to bring in just about everybody to the project. Once he got the many curators thinking about the possibilities, he then stepped aside, letting things roll under its collective momentum. Amazingly, this committee-designed horse didn't wind up looking like a camel.

The repetitious biennials of the past are no more thanks to the new show's considerably expanded boundaries (which extend to Southeastern Ontario, including all-important Toronto). And to the relief of many, this greater inclusiveness has not been at the expense of artists closer to home. Western New Yorkers form a solid, sometimes brilliant, core at the show's center. Look at the films of David Baeumler or work of Alfonso Volo or the paintings of Jackie Felix or Joe Miller or Rodney D. Taylor. These are pieces that can stand with work anywhere.

Another problem of the big, lumpy, stylistic crazy quilt that is your usual biennial is that too much art of too varied kinds ends up in the same place. All the art - whatever its scale, its texture, its content - must be accommodated to the configuration of one site. Not so

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here: The 11 sites offered everything from the regal E.B. Green galleries of the old Albright-Knox building and the modernist box at the Castellani Art Museum to Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center's temporary space and the tiny storefront that is the El Museo Francisco Oller y Diego Rivera.

Some works absolutely triumphed in quirky spaces. Patrick Robideau's dark take on childhood memories seemed eminently suited to Carnegie Art Center's unique main gallery. Karen Henderson's "Niagara Falls Storefront" in CEPA Gallery's Main Street storefront was a superb example of site-specific art. Adrienne Little's "When Ready to Use Again Soak in Buttermilk," even with its emotional overreach, was enhanced by the low, horizontal space of CEPA's Underground Gallery.

And the grand, old-world space of the Albright-Knox's 1901 gallery was the perfect place for DeWitt Godfrey's balancing act between monumental site sculpture and some jerry-built object one bolt from collapse. At the University at Buffalo Art Gallery, Carin Mincemoyer's "Grounded" transformed the difficult white tower called Lightwell Gallery into a modernist architectural fantasy that made apparent the failed interchange between the ecologically detached modern city and nature through a gleaming display of stacked Styrofoam "planters." A potent aside was aimed at suburbia through the piece's decklike walkways.

Installations - or otherwise independent works presented as installations - benefited greatly from the variety of sites. At Big Orbit Gallery, Paul Vanouse's cool and impassive "The Active-Stimulation Feedback Platform" offered a promise of global communication through audio links to cities worldwide. But in the end it was a kind of sci-fi toned, technologically determined fiction - a demonstration of technology's dominance over human interaction.

I couldn't help comparing Vanouse's piece with Millie Chen's emotionally charged sound/space installation, "Call," (Buffalo Arts Studio). Here, too, communication is aborted. Haunting Arabic chants - seemingly at some indeterminate distance behind a scrim in the darkened space - retreat the closer we come to the source. Unlike

the Vanouse, feeling is everywhere apparent, but it's also forever ungraspable.

Some artists contrived to treat works conceived as more intimate pieces as installations. Leslie Eliet's scroll-like painting/print "Sea of Dreams" (UB) might have been as effective as a folding book as it was stretched out in a continuous strip around the gallery walls. In any case, at the opening composer Ritsu Katsumata, in a powerful and evocative performance on electric violin played to fragmented videos of "Sea of Dreams," pushed the artwork into rugged dissonant emotional territory. It was an unintended critique of Eliet's sweet romantic vision.

In an inspired installation, painter Alberto Rey (El Museo) joined theme-connected paintings and videos in dramatic and cohesive fashion. Marie de Sousa's effort (CEPA) to combine video and painting back to back seemed a pointless exercise, however.

The painting ranged from marvelous to muddled. Felix's work looked particularly strong, with the not-very-happy "We're Really Happy" series lining one long wall. These were expressions of modern malaise that Joe Miller, playing it safe, showed many steps removed in a skilled revisiting of pre-Raphaelite realism. **Jim Morris' gorgeous two-part abstractions (Burchfield-Penney) were sensitive forays into an organic world impinged upon by both technology and the happenstance of individual personality.**

Less successful were William Y. Cooper's bright rehash of synthetic cubism (Burchfield-Penney) and Kelly Palmer's revival of Hudson River landscapes (Albright-Knox), with their added, inexplicable red lines. At Castellani, Edward J. Luce's paintings looked trendy but have little bite; and Eric Glavin's appealing gemoetric abstractions turned out to be digital prints on canvas, sending them into that tired category where artists proclaim, "What you see is NOT what you get."

Oddly enough, critters of one kind or another occupy a number of fascinating artists. Volo's mouse tchotchkes do their mischief at Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center and at the Burchfield-Penney. At Castellani, Julian

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Montague's sleek and imposing inkjet prints offered composites views of insects that disregarded biological truth in favor of visual elegance. And at Albright-Knox, in Joy Adams' paintings, the fictional doppelganger Mad Sally was practically submerged in creatures of all sorts.

The show brimmed with wit and wisdom: Jody Lafond's hilarious tape "I Just Want To be a Structuralist Filmmaker" (Burchfield-Penney); John Knetch's multiveneue videos "Wheee! The People"; and Peter Byrne's almost giddy drawings that mix hints of Paul Klee with loopy diagrammatic drawing.

Sculpture goes far beyond Godfrey's mainstream corten loops. A counter-intuitive use of materials happened in Insoon Ha's "You Can Laugh," an oversized fetus done up in kitchen tile; in Anitra Hamilton's defused bomb decorated in Ukrainian egg shells; and, in a parallel idea, Stephanie Ashenfelder's "The Prothetics of War," featuring war planes covered in flowery wall paper.

At Hallwalls, found objects are used with potent intellectual force. While Volo's decked-out mice wittily pretended to attack the domestic zone, the ingenious Carlo Cesta assembled found architectural elements - garage doors, railings, etc. - that not so much exposed the emptiness of contemporary life as to serve up its dull accoutrements as a source of low-wattage celebrations. Allen C. Topolski, using altered found vintage appliances, also sees into an obscure emotional territory within the most mundane of objects. After these two, ordinary things can no longer be taken at face value.

As anybody might expect in a huge collaborative project of this sort, holes do appear. Photography was pretty much limited to the (fake-or-real?) landscapes of Toni Hafkenscheid (CEPA) and Shelly Niro's black-and-white evocations of Native American rituals (a nice connective to Jolene Rickard's installation at Langston Hughes). I didn't find much in Ben and Jeanne Dunkle's frail pairing of photographs and prints (Albright-Knox), nor in Kate Ross' derivative "Red's Cave" (Anderson Gallery). Lisa Stelle and Kim Tomczak's somnambulistic video, "We're Getting Younger All the Time" felt like it aged me by at least a couple of decades.

Overall, though, this huge display had emotional teeth, intellectual vigor and conceptual smarts. It was stimulating, thoughtful and also just plain fun. I have the feeling, however, that many gallerygoers may be sticking to their usual haunts.

I didn't, for example, see the familiar faces that are habitually seen at the Albright-Knox openings popping up at the other venues. I hope the snob factor isn't still in effect. The point of the exhibition is collaboration. None of this great effort will have the expected good residual effects if the public doesn't move out and see this stuff - or worse, if the politics of gallery and museum boards settle back into the usual us-versus-them mentality.

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