

Art review: Out of the playpen, into the gallery

Biennial fills the Minnesota Museum of American Art with too much of the state's worst art.

By **Mary Abbe**, Star Tribune

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Enough with the playpens. Artists have been wallowing in them for decades, encouraged by art schools, galleries, museums and collectors to release their inner child, to express their wanton wills and to liberate whatever little thoughts and emotions might flit through their little minds and souls. Well. Enough about you and your whims, your neuroses, your flights of fancy, your scribbles and drips and fun-with-the-trash.

Let's declare an end to navel-gazing, sophomoricism, banality and self-indulgence. Let's move on to something -- anything -- more visually engaging and intellectually stimulating than the dismal dreck that's showcased through Feb. 3 in the Minnesota Biennial: 3D II at the Minnesota Museum of American Art.

The show, fourth in a series that began in 2000 as a statewide survey of two-dimensional and three-dimensional art, is a remarkably dispiriting affair. The art was chosen, from 147 entries, by guest curator Jennifer Jankauskas, an associate curator at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wis.

To be fair, at least five pieces out of the 31 are quite fine indeed -- elegant, intelligent, quirky, thought-provoking, finely crafted. And another five have something to recommend them.

About the best: Near the show's entrance, Cheryle Melander has installed "Strays," dozens of slinky-like ceramic tubes arranged as if they were creeping across the floor and up the walls, where they inevitably suggest lemmings or a herd of some mysterious creatures. Similarly, Ben Garthus displays about 300 casts of common lids and containers -- milk cartons, shells, shampoo bottles, etc. -- that attain a strange beauty when re-cast in ivory plastic. Jack F.X. Pavlik's Erector Set sculpture of undulating steel bands seems a successful hymn to old-fashioned industry, while Jantje Visscher creates magical effects by bouncing light off narrow strips of acetate pinned to the wall. With a dressmaker's mannequin and sewing patterns, Marilyn Stevens sculpts poetic tributes to a mother afflicted with Alzheimer's disease.

Innocuous but noteworthy items include: Robin Cotton's lightbox sign announcing "This is Serious!," Kristina Estell's artfully arranged pile of inflated vinyl bags containing stones, David Swanson's scale model of shabby structures perched on rusting supports (Mississippi bridge, anyone?), Anastasia Ward's creepy mutant stuffed animals and David Bowen's network of bamboo shoots on artificial life support.

From bad to vulgar

Way too much of the remaining stuff, however, is painfully obvious, childish, pointless and self-indulgent. There's a smack of grade-school earnestness to Barbara Claussen's tiny diorama of bubble-headed urbanites talking on cell phones, Pete Driessen's stick boats with sail-drawings of aborigines, Alison Hiltner's gaudy diorama about pollination and John Ilg's use of plastic toy soldiers to illustrate political divisions in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Heavy-handed whimsy marks Julia Kouneski's camera obscura helmets, Carrie Phoenix's deflated balls cast in concrete, Todd Severson's dangling "nest" of ceramic astronaut toys and Andy Messerschmidt's shrine of Christmas ornaments. Seho Park's fist-sized ball of scribbled paper is inconsequential at best.

There may be a socio-political screed of some sort intended by Jake Keeler's nasty tangles of black plastic, gunnysacks and rags, or in the dreary walls that Elizabeth Jeffries Barnes and Kristina Knuth Morse garnished with crushed newsprint and stains. If so, the message is lost in the mess. And Gail Katz-James' big, gaudy diaphragm-sculptures are inexpressibly vulgar.

David Hamlow gets the prize for self-indulgence. An amiable fellow from Good Thunder, Minn., Hamlow for years saved the packaging from everything he consumed (soda cases, tissue boxes, fast-food wrappers) and fashioned it into storage-container sculptures. Recently he disassembled a sculpture and sent each of the 45 triangular components to a friend or family member, asking them to respond with an artwork. The responses -- CDs, photos, scrapbook, toys, driftwood miniatures -- are displayed with Hamlow's reassembled container. Thank you all for sharing.

It would be easy -- and charitable -- to credit the creators of this junk with good intentions about raising awareness of environmental issues, conservation, politics and the like. But this stuff is so hapless and sophomoric that it should be a wakeup call to the museum if this biennial is to continue. If more artists of quality can't be persuaded to enter the event, it should be scrapped rather than perpetuate the impression that this appalling juvenilia represents the state's best. It doesn't.

Pieces by Elisa Berry and Jeffrey Morrison hadn't been installed during a preview tour. But Minneapolis artist Ruben Nusz got the last word; his sculpture is a garbage can filled with trash.

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