

The Corcoran Biennial: Dramatic License

By Michael O'Sullivan

December 27, 2002



"The Paradise Institute," Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, Emersive Installation, 2002

THE WORK that best exemplifies the central theme of the 47th Corcoran Biennial, "Fantasy Underfoot," a splendid survey of contemporary art that gathers, in its wide embrace, works welding the concrete to the conceptual, is "The Paradise Institute," a mind- and sense-blowing installation by the husband-and-wife team of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. If there were nothing else worth looking at in this 13-artist exhibition (and that is emphatically not the case), this single piece would be worth the cost of admission -- and the time necessary to experience it. Step inside the plywood construction, about the size of a construction-site trailer, settle into one of 16 seats, strap on your headphones and prepare to be amazed. In front of you is a railing. Beyond and below that, a sea of empty theater seats facing a movie screen (they're - only slightly larger than dollhouse-scale, but because of the perspective, they look life-size). When the last visitor is seated, the door is closed and the movie begins, a 13-minute, mostly black-and-white digital video whose action invokes art-house symbolism (a burning house), cheesy melodrama (a man is strapped to a hospital bed) and the elements of a thriller (in the form of a bad guy with a heavy accent of indeterminate origin).

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On the headphones you'll hear not only the dialogue and score of the film but the ambient sound of the "audience," in this case not the real audience you're sitting with (although they bleed through from time to time), but the sounds of another virtual assembly: a woman loudly eating popcorn and wondering to her companion if he turned off the stove before they left the house; an Italian who takes a cell phone call in the row behind you; and a waggish young man a few seats away who talks back to the screen as if he were a "Rocky Horror Picture Show." "That's good nursing," he cracks to the general amusement of both the real and unreal crowd when a pretty on-screen hospital worker lifts up her patient's shirt to begin feverishly kissing his chest.

At other points, you'll swear you hear someone outside the box walking on the roof. At another, several people seem to be running around smacking the exterior walls with their hands. Later, after the popcorn woman has gotten up to leave — how can you enjoy the show thinking your house might burn down? — a man sits down next to you and begins whispering in your ear. Try not to be alarmed if he sounds just like the bad guy from the screen. On one level, "The Paradise Institute" is a commentary on the conventions of cinema — its physical trappings, on-screen visual vocabulary and the mechanism whereby a communal act becomes a private ritual.

On another level, it is a commentary on itself as an art installation. As with any movie we allow ourselves to be taken up by the action, but we are also constantly reminded that we are in a theater as well. Then, just when this dichotomy is driven home, we're jolted back to the fact that we're in a museum after all, and that the theater we're sitting in is as illusory as the film. Ultimately, though, where you end up here is in the dark box of your own little head, a place of sudden doubt and fear that your senses — after all, what else do you have to rely on? — may not be as trustworthy as you thought. It's a disorienting and liberating experience at the same time.

Other notable stops include Tim Hawkinson's "Drip," a sort of room-size percussion instrument with a jury-rigged hardware "brain" that "plays" water falling onto aluminum pie pans. Constructed of tubing and plastic sheets that have twisted into long ropes of intestinal dreadlocks, the work continues Hawkinson's inventive and graceful investigations, familiar to those who saw his show at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, of the human body as a machine — and vice versa.



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Like El Hanani, painter Linda Besemer approaches the act of mark-making in a way that is both accumulative and reductive. Layering sheet after sheet of acrylic paint -- in intricate striped and crisscross patterns -- to glass, she builds up flexible quarter-inch slabs that can be peeled off and draped over aluminum rods. Deprived of their ground and frames -- in short, their traditional context as paintings -- her work deliberately distorts our understanding of what painting is.



Linda Besemer, Fold #55, Sheet of Acrylic Paint over Aluminum Rod, 2002

Nigel Poor had an intriguing idea: Ask Person A to pick three objects that defined that person, then suggest the name of an acquaintance (Person B) who would then choose another three objects that defined Person A. Poor would then assemble and photograph each of the six artifacts associated with Person A, repeating the process with Person B and an acquaintance of his or her choosing (Person C), until a cycle of 12 "portraits" had been completed. As an extension of Poor's interest in the categorization of people and things, it's a potentially fruitful project, but one that, by its very design, avoids an edginess that could make it really interesting. If, for instance, Person B were selected not by Person A but by the artist anonymously, there

might have been more tension between the public face her subjects put forward and the way others privately see them. By way of example, Poor cites a case in which one subject, a middle-aged man, chose his teenage daughter, but balked when she selected a pair of underpants to represent him. In a show filled with contrast and contradiction, ably epitomized by the work of local artist Susan Smith-Pinelo, whose video work wrestles with the artist's ambivalence toward hip-hop music and culture -- "I'm a huge fan/slave," she says -- the homogeneity of Poor's "Three Objects" series leaves one with the rare craving for something with a bit more bite.

THE 47TH CORCORAN BIENNIAL: FANTASY UNDERFOOT -- Through March 10 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 500 17th St. NW (Metro: Farragut West). 202-639-1700.

www.corcoran.org. Open 10 to 5 daily except Tuesdays; Thursdays to 9. Admission \$5; \$3 for seniors and guests of members; \$1 for students; \$8 for families.