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FRIEZE MAGAZINE

Moving Images

VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

Site Sante Fe' s Eighth International Biennial is as inspiring as it is original



Sometimes someone gets it right. This allows hard-to-please critics a double opportunity: on the one hand, they can refresh neglected words of praise (words instantly distinguishable from puffery) rather than rely yet again on sharp but cumulatively dispiriting terms of condemnation (terms typical of pannery). On the other, it affords too often disappointed writers a chance to hold up a positive example of what they value rather than obliging them to frame their convictions in the negative. This helps to correct any disproportionate imbalance in their overall roster of assessments, and that is important since over the long haul such disequilibrium may lead the serious critic to acquire the habits of a hanging judge without really intending to. Of course, the members of the public who have come to think of reviewing as a blood sport can be counted on to cheer such 'toughness' even as they usually ignore gestures of thumbs-up

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favoritism that invariably creep in alongside otherwise routine thumbs-down contempt.

Happily, there is among the current crop of summer shows, a shining instance of how a contemporary survey can offer little-known or unknown work genuinely new insights into distant corners of the art forest, historical grounding and an innovative model of presentation all in one economical package. The eighth installment of the site Santa Fe International Biennial is titled 'The Dissolve'. Those responsible for it are the curatorial team of Daniel Belasco and Sarah Lewis and the architect David Adjaye who was invited to join them in solving the most vexed problem in exhibition craft: how to make a show of moving images that isn't a maze of black-box galleries.

site is a small operation in a small but culturally rich town geographically distant from the rest of the art world. Santa Fe's mixture of isolation and cosmopolitanism may explain why its biennial has developed a reputation for doing things efficiently but well, and, within those constraints, why it has taken chances that bigger and better-funded venues have not. Aside from Dave Hickey – the Michel Foucault-quoting but disdainfully anti-academic former professor at the University of Las Vegas, free art-market booster of MacArthur Fellowship fame and all-around all-American Tea Party aesthete, Slim Pickens impersonator and friend-of-Leo (Castelli) – the list of site curators has included Rosa Martinez, Francesco Bonami and myself, all of us before we were chosen to be Director of the Venice Biennale.

The subject of 'The Dissolve' is the low-tech moving image. Indeed it is the first major show to focus exclusively on art being produced in the overlapping means of hands-on animation currently in use. The artists range from the nonagenarian Maria Lassnig to emerging talents such as Mary Reid Kelley, Jacco Olivier, Robert Pruitt, Christine Rebet, Hiraki Sawa and Federico Solmi through to mid-career figures such as William Kentridge, Jennifer and Jason McCoy, Joshua Mosley, Oscar Muñoz, Raymond Pettibon, Robin Rhode, Berni Searle, Cindy Sherman and Kara Walker.

Shunning high-tech methods for puppetry, flip books and stop-motion photography as well as other types of pictorial sequencing, makes the perfectionism of Pixar the implicit foil for the show. Correspondingly, the charm these back-to-basics flickers exude contains various elements of deliberate anachronism. In order not only to establish the history of the medium but to challenge nostalgia by rendering critical consciousness of the past acute, the curators have included landmarks from the earliest eras of the genre, notably works by Thomas Edison's studio, Fleischer Studios, Lotte Reiniger – her feature-length Arabian

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Nights tale told with sleek, silhouetted paper dolls is one of the marvels of the show and a strong counter-term to Walker's funky, wrenching shadow play – and Dziga Vertov.

The only exception to this eschewing of digital wizardry in favour of prestidigitation is the breathtaking, electronically state-of-the-art motion-capture choreo graphic project of Bill T. Jones which occupies the sole black-box enclosure at the core of the installation. For the rest, the projections are presented in see-through envelopes, chambers or amphitheatres of space created by gauzy hangings conceived for the occasion by Adjaye. The paradigm-changing result is a transparent labyrinth where – without sound leakage – viewers can glimpse suggestive movement on the screens ahead or behind the one they are standing in front of, as well as of other viewers with whom they share the Plato's Cave of cinema and video. The works range from comic vaudeville (Edison, Lassnig, Rhode) to tragic vaudeville (Reid), from post-punk angst (Solmi) to the elegiac (Berni, Kentridge, Mosley), with much else in between.

If I were young, how would I want to begin my curatorial life? With an exhibition like this – because there's never been one like it before.

Robert Storr