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Pick of the Litter

At the Carnegie International, Artists of All Stripes

By *Blake Gopnik*

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PITTSBURGH

There are 38 artists showing in the Carnegie International exhibition of contemporary art, which opened to the public Saturday at the Carnegie Museum of Art. Among all those art makers, 13 presented works that meant something to me.

If this were baseball, that would be a fine batting average of .342.

If it were a test in school, 13 out of 38 would come nowhere near a passing grade.

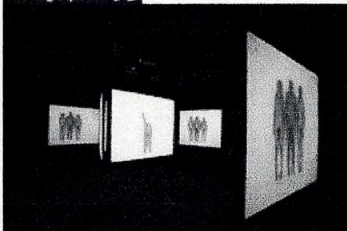
But since it's the art world in 2004, I'd say it's about your average situation. It reflects the huge variety of stuff that now counts as credible contemporary art. There's such a range out there that any reasonable survey is going to be lucky if even one-third of it speaks to any single critic.

Pittsburgh's Carnegie International, once an annual event but now held only twice a decade, is the second-oldest worldwide anthology of contemporary art, and the only major one in the United States. It was launched in 1896, just one year after the Venice Biennale. Patron Andrew Carnegie wanted to support high culture and boost his home town's status, all at one go.

Unlike Venice, however, which always has a pile of national pavilions competing for attention with its main curated show, the last few Internationals have been given over to just one organizer's interests and tastes. This year, the exhibition has been curated by an American, Laura Hoptman. But despite that single guiding hand, the art world's jangling multiplicity comes through loud and clear.

Hoptman doesn't think of her show as an inclusive survey of the current state of things. Her catalogue essay argues that over the half-decade since the last International, there's been a Return

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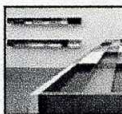


Katarzyna Kozyra's video projection "The Rite of Spring" uses stop-motion pictures of naked elderly people. (From *Altany* -- Carnegie International)

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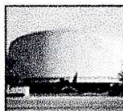
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to Values in the art world -- some kind of reengagement with discovering "what it is to be a human being," with the Human Condition that art appreciation classes used to tout. Her show's supposed to illustrate that "ethical" trend. But there are a bunch of problems with Hoptman's account.



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For one, a number of her artists had their heyday way more than five years ago. There's cartoonist Robert Crumb, whose mini-survey is a major focus of the International. Crumb's not exactly a new figure on the cultural scene, and trademark Crumb characters like Mr. Natural and Fritz the Cat don't exactly scream 2004. Ditto for the dated, science-fiction fantasies of sculptor Lee Bontecou, whose trademark style jelled in the same acid-tripping years that Crumb's did. There's also a Serbian artist who called himself Mangelos, and who died in 1987. He made conceptual art that would have felt entirely at home in the decade of his death.



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And then there are quite a few talented and well-known artists in the International -- Kutlug Ataman, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Maurizio Cattelan - - who became hot commodities before the trend toward big ideas that Hoptman claims to have spotted. In fact, they were well represented in the international exhibitions of the previous, "superficial" era whose death her show is supposed to mark.

The sheer variety of artworks on display in Hoptman's exhibition argues for the incoherence of the "impulse toward the ethical" she claims unites them. If tame abstraction, funky ceramic art, nostalgic figurative painting, thoughtful video documentary and witty, pseudo-scientific installation art can all count as having the same "impulse" underlying them, then that impulse has got to be so vague and all-encompassing it's hardly worth a thought.

Hoptman's high-flown "humanist" claims have not produced a show notably different from many other surveys of the last decade or more. That's hardly surprising: I cannot think of any work of man-made art that couldn't be spun as somehow bound up with living a human life. Hoptman may be able to read a new humanism into all the pieces in her show, but that doesn't mean that any other viewer will grasp the same thematic thread.

Luckily, the best things in this exhibition don't need to belong to any overarching trend to score their points. They work fine on their own.

Turkish artist Kutlug Ataman presents a large room filled with 40 junk-store TVs, on 40 secondhand stands, with 40 Salvation Army chairs inviting 40 viewers to take a seat and watch the artist's programming. All of the TVs present taped, subtitled interviews with the inhabitants of Kuba, a freewheeling shantytown in Istanbul that is the last refuge for people who don't fit elsewhere in Turkish society. There's a little boy who's never known a different life, and sees a world of fights and gangs as a suitably thrilling setting for his childhood. There's a sober, well-educated older man who's lived in Kuba since before it got its official counterculture name. He feels his neighborhood has lost the utopian sheen that it once had. And there's a dislocated Kurdish woman who sees the multiculti Kuba as her only haven amid ethnic persecution. Ataman gives a brilliantly straightforward, un-arty portrait of an entire social world. The artist never editorializes, and that makes his piece all the more convincingly empathetic. It won the Carnegie Prize for best work in the exhibition.

At the other end of the International's wide range of art comes ceramist Kathy Butterly, one of the show's few impressive finds. Butterly makes odd, misshapen vessels that mix a preposterous amount of fine handiwork with a strangely funky, lumpen sensibility. Butterly's vessels are made of

thin porcelain, fired again and again as she paints on various brightly colored glazes. The precision of Butterly's finish is in fantastic tension with the twisted, contorted, Crumb-like forms of her almost anthropomorphic vessels; her pots nearly come to life as cartoon characters. The exhibition brochure puts it nicely: "They celebrate delicacy and prettiness while acknowledging the unheralded grace of all things quirky, klutzy and old."

Between those two extremes of the almost unmade (in Ataman) and the traditionally handmade (in Butterly) comes a bunch of other interesting work.

Peruvian artist Fernando Bryce has gathered an archive of clippings and documents that record the volatile state of politics and culture in Latin America during the Cold War. But instead of presenting the original faded scraps of newsprint, Bryce has covered the gallery walls with hand-drawn, pen-and-ink facsimiles of all the documents that he's amassed. Ephemeral scraps of ephemeral culture are lovingly archived in a classic fine-art medium; helter-skelter accumulation becomes elegant, even lyrical, repetition, in the grand modernist tradition of Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin. There's a sense that, if only we take enough care in looking at the world and recording all its nuances in art, we'll make some sense of it. And a much stronger sense of the task's well-intentioned futility.

Polish artist Katarzyna Kozyra also seems to have a vexed relationship with classic art. In a six-screen video projection called "The Rite of Spring," Kozyra presents an animated re-creation of the famous modernist ballet that premiered in 1913, with music by Stravinsky and choreography by Nijinsky. But instead of using the usual tools of stop-motion filmmaking -- clay figures moved the barest hair in every frame -- she uses living senior citizens. She and her assistants place the naked seniors on a plain white ground, then move their static bodies frame by frame to mimic the fluid motions of athletic dancers. The ballet's supposedly archetypal story of pagan youth and sex and death and ritual is pulled limb from limb. Instead of giving everlasting insight into the "primitive" that lives inside us all, the dance becomes a disjointed collection of artificial moves that depend on the modernist artistic context that gave birth to them.

You realize that the 1913 "Rite of Spring" was as much about all the dance that came before -- about what counted as a lovely body, and what such bodies could be asked to do -- as about any story that it told. Re-present the same moves with the same music, but age the bodies that make them, and you've got an entirely different package of meanings. One of the "timeless" masterpieces of modern art is shown to be deeply full of the time and the ideas that surrounded its making. Stravinsky's "Rite" was about the sexist, ageist world he knew, not about primeval truths from way back in the mists of time.

Like many of the best works in this show, Kozyra's work seems more full of irony and doubt and hesitation than of newfound ethical grandeur. It seems to question all the verities of human life. It even questions old cliches that say art will give us ways to come to grips with who and what we humans are.

The Carnegie International continues through March 20 at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. Call 412-622-3131 or visit www.cmoa.org.

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