

The Star Ledger

International exhibit lives up to its name

More than 100 contemporary works drawn from wide world of creativity

Friday, March 02, 2007

ART

21st International Juried Show 2007

Where: Through March 30. 9:30 a.m. - 8 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays; 9:30 a.m. - 5 p.m. Fridays; and 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

How much: Free. Call (908) 273-9121 or visit www.artcenternj.org.

BY DAN BISCHOFF

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

There's not a better show of contemporary art in New Jersey right now than the one you can see in Summit. Every year at this time, the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey mounts a show of emerging artists drawn from a very wide range of young artists working, well, around the world: They call it the International Juried Show, and this year's version is the 21st in the series. Sometimes it seems a little more New Jersey, or New Yorky, anyway, than international — but this year's exhibit is different.

Not so much in quality — the International Juried Show is every year one of the best exhibits in the state — but certainly in the breadth of its sources. More than 1,800 artists submitted work to be judged by Laura Hoptman, senior curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, for this year's exhibition. She chose just 123 pieces, from around 100 artists, picking through submissions from New Jersey and New York but also from Italy, Israel, Germany, Japan, Canada, Sweden, England, New Zealand, Thailand, South Korea, Argentina, Spain, Mexico, even the Czech Republic.

Hoptman, who has been curator of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art and recently organized a retrospective of the work of head-comic artist Robert Crumb in Rotterdam and London, has sifted through this mountain of material to produce a really broadly representative show that feels particularly close to its times. Perhaps a curator with close experience with contemporary drawing could not choose any other kind of show, but its still a marvel.

This year's Best in Show, for example, went to Darice Polo's pencil drawing of her mother, "Theresa (1948)," a near-photographic portrait in graphite that recreates a post-war New York elevated platform with seven minutely detailed figures and a wickedly precise rendering of Mom looking into a family camera (Polo's work is often derived from aging family photos). Polo is now an assistant professor of drawing at Kent State University in Ohio, and she represents the kind of intensely realized drawing that more and more young people are doing, not just for realism but for the meticulous process it forces them to follow.

This year's painting award went to New Yorker Linda Marston-Reid for her encaustic on panel, "Gold Lotto Tree," and the Jurgen Thieck Memorial Award for Photography went to New Jersey's Lauren Vallese for her untitled color print of an elderly woman sitting next to a ceramic cat, a homely image that sparkles with circumstantial details.

But you get a sense of the depth of this exhibition by glancing over the near-dozen of honorable mentions, like John Lawson's "Flood Line," a rack of water-damaged family snapshots covered by a fringe of recycled Mardi Gras beads — an eloquent elegy for a lost city — or Isable Brito-Farre's "Things Go Slow Here," a kind of drawing in pencil and embroidered thread on paper, a technique that we are seeing more and more frequently among woman artists.

The International Juried Show frequently rewards a visitor with a showcase of rapidly spreading techniques like this (one of the Merit Awards went to Virginian Larry Estes for “11-24-06J,” a pen-on-paper drawing augmented with sewn thread and rips). Georgian artist Susan Murrell’s “Archive,” a mock-scientific installation of artist-invented marine life that spreads across one corner of the hallway exhibition space (complete with a book of photos of the plastic “life” anchored by a cable to the wall, like an anatomist’s handbook for the imaginary ecosystem) also won a Merit Award. We have seen the technique of mass-producing artificial life forms and placing them all through a gallery like an infestation again and again lately.

Much more common media, like the straight photograph of a ghostly, fog-enshrouded beach called “Effigy — Part of Asbury Park Series” by New Jersey artist Karen Ludlam, which also won a Merit Award, are plentiful here, too.

But its the chance to travel out into the prosperous suburb of Summit and see really odd, new things, like Mari Terauchi’s little 18-inch-tall doll of a man walking across the snow (made with flour and sugar on the gallery floor), his footprints shrinking from life-size to doll-size across a few feet of space, that makes the International Juried Show so fine. Terauchi, who worked in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, says the figure is based on a Kurdish man she met who told of escaping Saddam by crossing the snow-covered mountains on Iraq’s northern border. The doll looks up at the sky as if to see flour-sugar snowflakes, and we can look into his eyes as they diminish on leaving his home.

Contemporary art is all narrative, and at the VACNJ there are more than 100 to see right now.

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