

ART

Part urban cowboy, part suburban angst

By Elizabeth Marglin

Camera Visual Arts Critic

Although not particularly shocking, the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver's Biennial Blow Out makes up for provocation with healthy servings of irony, wit and self-reflection. While the MCA's third biennial has a polished, professional feel, there is an undercurrent of renegade, independent spirit, of art that marches to the beat of its own drum.

This quirkiness is precisely what MCA director Cydney Payton wanted. Whereas the most important biennial in the country — the Whitney Biennial — focuses on up-and-coming national artists, the focus of MCA's Biennial always has been on regional artists. This year the region has been expanded from just Colorado to embrace the Rocky Mountain West, which the MCA defines as Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming.

As Payton writes in her accompanying essay, "Blow Out examines how artistic thinking and practice is true to Western maverick origins. In general, artists working in the West have held on to their independent artistic origins."

In order to best capture this "lonesome cowboy" aesthetic, Payton pulled in internationally renowned curator Kenny Schachter, who is famous for his offbeat sensibility. Schachter had the unenviable job of sorting through more than 780 artists' submissions, which were not identified by state or name. In a marathon of three days he made his selections, choosing only 10 artists so as to give each more space to fully articulate his or her work.

The result is a surprisingly cohesive show, dominated by themes of identity, isolation and the yearning, however coded, for a sense of place. Heavy on digital art and lean on more conventional painting, the survey seeks to reflect the current state of contemporary art in the region. In that, it is modestly successful, though of course it does not purport to be a comprehensive look.

The show begins with a trio of Louisa Armbrust's digital drawings — brightly colored, tersely humorous diagrams of what vaguely resembles a school playground. There is an edge of violence, an odd disconnect in the games, that makes looking at the work unsettling. Flat and cartoonish, this is play run amok, stray balls that become heads and vice versa.

Across from the Armbrust are four of Jason Patz's fragmented self-portraits. Patz, who was Westword's 2004 pick for



"Best Photography Solo, Emerging Talent," uses the camera as a means of carefully guarded disclosure. In these strikingly simple photos, he reveals awkward portions of his face — stubble, scars, enlarged pores and jowls — with almost heroic detachment. Oddly intimate, the portraits simultaneously invite and shut out the viewer, creating an uneasy dynamic.

The act of perception becomes a subtext for the show. In Susan Meyer's installation "Nudetopia," tiny naked figures the height of matchsticks roam an abstract landscape of layered, wood laminate forms. Bridges connect some of the discrete units, but the figures are seen mostly in isolation, engrossed in some private, animated reverie. Inspired by the idea of utopian experiments, the installation explores a failed, misguided spirituality — nakedness denuded of meaning.

In a clever twist, Meyer also presents a viewing station for the piece, a white, ultra-modern Karim Rashid chair placed next to a table with "Nudetopia" T-shirts and business cards. The lines between utopian ideals,

art, and marketing merge seamlessly.

When "Nudetopia" becomes too heady, one door down are David Sharpe's hauntingly beautiful pinhole photographs of the eastern plains. The grainy prints read more like drawings or paintings, capturing the essence of the landscape rather than specific details. The photographs, devoid of people, dwell in the romance of the big sky feel of the West. Baldly nostalgic, the suite of photos turns sheds and silos into icons for a time that Sharpe implies is soon to disappear.

The sense of the fleeting is charmingly conveyed in Angela Ellsworth's napkin sketches, a series of "stitch drawings" rendered by sewing black thread through napkins. These whimsical portraits have the immediacy of the artist's hand, something missing throughout most of the show. Whimsical and yet shrewdly telling, the portraits manage to pack a profound impact into so ephemeral a medium. Their graphic, personable quality plays well against Sharpe's grand vistas.

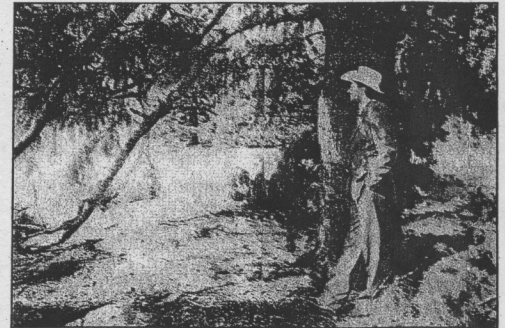
In another version of the mythic West, Patti Hallock's se-

ries of photographs trace a bearded man in gaudy outfit as he moves about a city. Wearing a red suit, red sneakers, sunglasses and a cowboy hat, the man seems stuck in his own facade. Hallock's photos convey an environment of heightened malaise — something is profoundly out of sync, although it's hard to put your finger on what exactly that is.

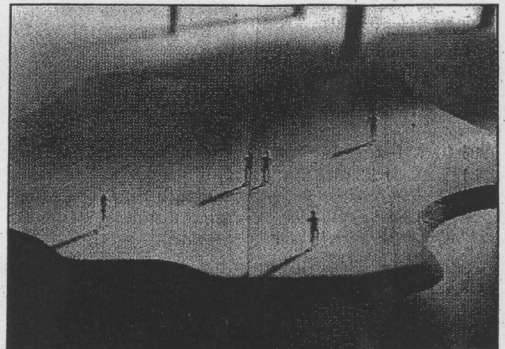
Jessica James Lansdon offers yet another vision of the incongruities of the heartland. In her "Superstitious Mountain/The War Between the States," digitally manipulated photos of fallen Civil War soldiers are juxtaposed against two mountains made from saguaro cacti. The cliché "Can't Go Home Again" dominates the installation, which is painstakingly linked to the piece through elaborate string art. Although the references in the piece are somewhat obtuse, the obsessively detailed presentation doesn't necessarily need explanation.

Jeff Starr, a painter turned sculptor, serves up some lighter fare with his goofy earthenware pseudo-icons. In a pastiche of styles that embraces the rococo along with classic cartoon imagery, his sculptures

Angela Ellsworth's thread-on-napkin work "Andy."



Patti Hallock's "In The Park."



Detail from Susan Meyer's "Nudetopia."

IF YOU GO

WHAT • 2005 Biennial Blow Out
WHEN • Through Sept. 25; hours, 11 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Saturday, noon to 5:30 p.m. Sunday
WHERE • Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver, 127E
TICKETS • \$3-\$5, children younger than 12 free
INFO • (303) 298-7554 or www.mcartdenver.org

puzzle and tease their way into a cheerful engagement with the viewer. Stumps are used for several of the sculptures, a reference to their frequent appearance in cartoons as props. Here they become ironic signposts of life deadened by cuteness.

The dialectic of absence and presence that hovers over the show gets full expression in Sherlock Terry's "At Home," a photo series of his home environment. Using lenticular technology, which displays one image from one angle and another image from another angle, Terry records the movement of light as it passes through his home. The house, empty of inhabitants but filled with clues of their presence, has a kind of attenuated domestic mystery. The viewer has the curious sensation of eavesdropping on a home, witnessing it in the act of solitude.

Finally, Denis Gillingwater's "Divisions/Divides/Distances" is a fascinating look at Denver as seen through the eye of surveillance cameras. His complex installation posits images seen through surveillance systems

with small photos of billboards, buildings, trees, tract housing and sky. The photos create a dialogue among themselves, such as the billboard of the smiling white faces of the Fox 31 news team in contrast with solemn, wounded stare of the American Indian taken from the front of the Colorado History Museum.

Gillingwater explores how the urban, built-up environment affects the psyche in subtle, unconscious ways. His is a West slowly swallowed by strip malls and cell phone towers, a land that is "Home of the Free" in billboard only. By highlighting the relationship of viewer and view, the elusive art of viewing itself gets revealed.

In a way, how surveillance divides and connects is a metaphor for the show as a whole. Although not always comfortable, this show holds a compelling mirror up to our carefully constructed identities. Don't miss the chance to take a good, hard look.

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