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JEFFREY KASTNER ON THE ISTANBUL BIENNIAL

Faith-Based Initiative

THE ORGANIZERS OF THE 8th International Istanbul Biennial could be forgiven for looking over their shoulder as the show's opening approaches later this month. After all, the last two installments of the exhibition coincided with tragic circumstances—the 1999 show, curated by Paolo Colombo, debuted only a month after one of the most devastating earthquakes in Turkish history, while Yuko Hasegawa's 2001 edition had the misfortune of kicking off just ten days after the World Trade Center attacks. Despite these unhappy coincidences, Istanbul has managed over the last decade and a half to successfully establish itself on the biennial circuit, with its position as a kind of fulcrum between Europe, Asia, and Africa drawing artists, curators, and critics from around the world to the historic city on the Bosphorus.

This year's biennial was organized by Dan Cameron, senior curator of New York's New Museum of Contemporary Art. Built around

the concept of "Poetic Justice," the show, says Cameron, was inspired by a desire to redress the "obsolete" divisions that exist between the spheres of politics and spirituality in contemporary art. "I've always been struck by the fact that artists who make political art and artists who

COMING ON THE HEELS OF WHAT MANY OBSERVERS HAVE CHARACTERIZED AS A SEASON OF RATHER ANODYNE INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITIONS, "POETIC JUSTICE" PROMISES A WELCOME DOSE OF PROVOCATION.

make spiritual art don't recognize each other's existence," says Cameron. "I think political engagement is meaningless without some other relationship to, let's say, internal values, while the other can be too New Age-y and touchy-feely and doesn't have the sense of urgency of what's transpiring around us. So I began to look for artists who combined the two."

Cameron's show, which runs from September 20 through November 16, brings together eighty-five

participants from more than forty nations and, not surprisingly, features a substantial contingent of artists—Willie Doherty (Northern Ireland), Milica Tomic (Serbia), Zwelethu Mthethwa (South Africa), Nalini Malani (India), and Pakistani-born Shahzia Sikander, to name just a few—who hail from places where the collision of "internal values" and politics has produced fatally volatile social conditions. Unlike many exhibitions of its type, the Istanbul Biennial allows its curators to choose their own venues, and Cameron has settled on four main locations: Antrepo, a large exhibition hall originally built in the 1950s as a customs warehouse; Tophane-i Amire, a fifteenth-century artillery factory-turned-exhibition space; the Yerebatan Cistern, an underground water-storage facility constructed by the emperor Justinian in AD 532; and the imposing Hagia Sophia Museum, which will house projects including one by South African artist Kendell Geers that involves chaining and suspending in midair bronze statues of Jesus, Muhammad, and the Buddha. It's the type of potentially controversial work, says Cameron, that could only be mounted there within the context of the biennial and the Turkish authorities' attendant "temporary suspension" of censorship.

Cameron's conceptual statement for the biennial situates the show within the context of a growing struggle in today's art world over how to most effectively address the "lack of connection that most people feel towards contemporary art," and laments what he describes as a persistent "flatness of affect" in much current artistic production. Coming on the heels of what many observers have characterized as a season of rather anodyne international exhibitions, his ambitions for "Poetic Justice" would seem to promise a welcome dose of purposeful provocation. "I have a deep personal commitment to the notion that the artistic

act functions in an almost cathartic way, as a demonstration of empowerment," says Cameron. "By making something out of nothing, the artist demonstrates that the evolution of consciousness depends on all of us doing something other than complaining or navel gazing or vegetating. I know possibly I could be accused of idealism in this," he continues with a wry laugh, "but it wouldn't be the first time." □

Jeffrey Kastner is a New York-based writer.

Clockwise from top left: Milica Tomic, *Remembering*, 2000, color photograph, 59 x 59". Zwelethu Mthethwa, *Mother and Child*, 2000, color photograph, 49 1/4 x 70". Shahzia Sikander, *SpinN*, 2003, still from a color digital animation, 6 minutes. Willie Doherty, *RE-RUN*, 2002, still from a two-screen color video installation, 30-second loop.