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▲ Robyn O'Neil: Everything that Stands (detail)

New Now Next

at the Blanton Museum

by Reza Shirazi

The new Blanton Museum opens its doors in Austin with a strong contemporary art show: New Now Next. The thirty four works from their collection makes a clear statement that this is not an academic museum mulling over historical art, but one that is willing to discover and champion art from the here and now.

But the here and now is a complex and confusing place. Artists today have a profusion of influences and images that gush out of the spout of contemporary life. And the art in the show reflects this abundance with works in a broad range of styles, mediums and subject matter.

To quote Arthur C. Danto from *After The End of Art* (Princeton University Press, 1997): "To say that history is over is to say that there is no longer a pale of history for works of art to fall outside of. Everything is possible. Anything can be art. And, because the present situation is essentially unstructured, one can no longer fit a master narrative to it.... It inaugurates the greatest era of freedom art has ever known."

This freedom in contemporary art creates a conundrum for museums. How do museums that traditionally try to classify and clarify, deal with the profusion and pluralism of contemporary art? Maybe, like the art that is displayed, the curators of this show hope, "to start conversations" rather than proffer answers.

One conversation that the show started for me was the use of traditional forms by a few works, but updated with contemporary techniques and references. If art is the search for meaning, some artists are reaching back to the past for a structure or reference, and from that place of familiarity, eliciting a contemporary response.

Shahzia Sikander, trained in the miniature painting tradition of the Indian subcontinent, mixes Hindu, Muslim and Western iconography to create a hybrid that mixes the ancient with the contemporary. Intimacy is two pieces - animation on a picture-frame sized screen, and a watercolor and dry pigment painting on wallpaper. The animation, a first for her created in her ArtPace residency, starts with a traditional looking Indian miniature of a woman standing next to a deer. The piece proceeds to layer over forms that are traditional as well as personal before returning to the original image. Her work comments on the mix of images and cultures that we are subject to in our increasingly globalized milieu.

Oliver Herring's "Patrick" is one of my favorite pieces in the show and I was not alone; it had a cluster of museum-goers constantly around it. The piece has a resemblance to Rodin's Thinker: a man resting his chin on his hand. But this form is remixed for the contemporary viewer. Herring took multiple photos of a model - Patrick - created a foam sculpture of his form, and painstakingly cut pieces of the photos and stuck them onto the form creating something that is both sculpture and photography. In drawing the viewer in by choosing a familiar form, Herring makes us look closer at his unique hybrid.

Robyn O'Neil's massive 8x13 foot triptych "Everything That Stands Will be at Odds With its Neighbor, And Everything That Falls Will Perish Without Grace" evokes Heironymous Bosch in its grand thematic scale and dread filled narrative. O'Neil uses muted materials - graphite on paper - but draws us into the work with her remarkable attention to detail. The work has scattered over it misshapen men in disjoint groups wearing sweat-suits, seemingly out of place in the alpine looking wilderness with wildlife and bushy trees. Mountains and dark

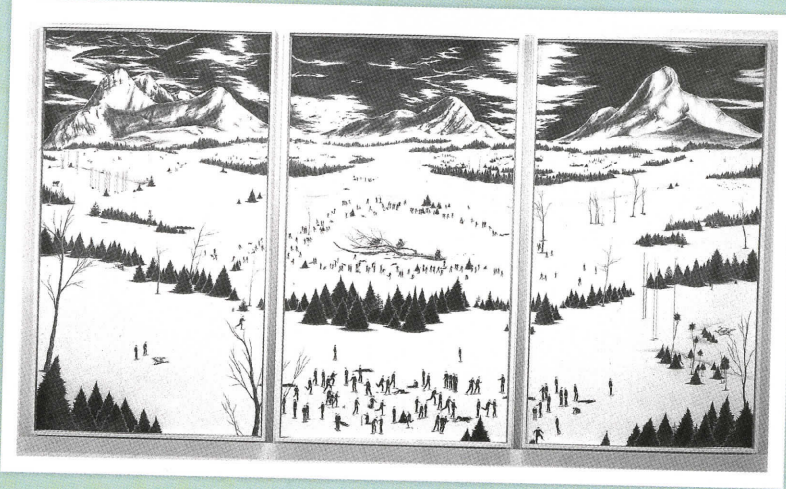
clouds loom in the background heightening the sense of dread and unknown future that seems imminent. In contrast to Bosch's subject of morality and hell, O'Neil's work completed in 2003 (again in an ArtPace residency) makes us think about the post 9/11 Age, where the hell we face is our own fear and anxiety.

About half the artists in the show are from Latin America, reinforcing the Blanton's strong collection and curatorial commitment to the southern part of our continent. The Blanton is unique in exhibiting the works of both North and South America as a whole rather than being separated. And not just in this show, but in their post-war Modern collection on the floor above too, the works are presented together.

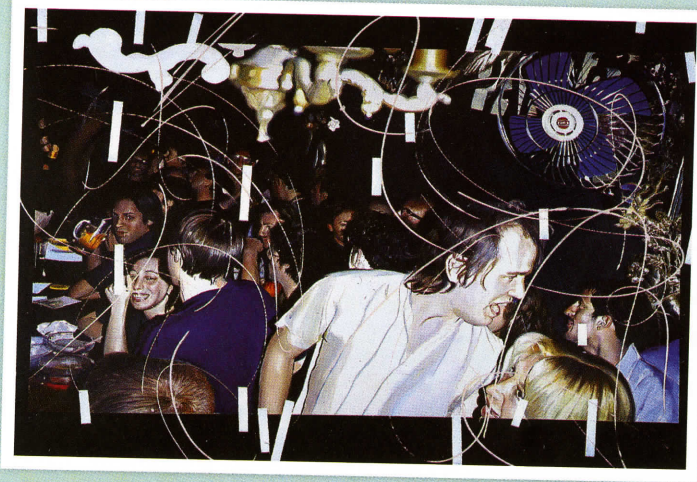
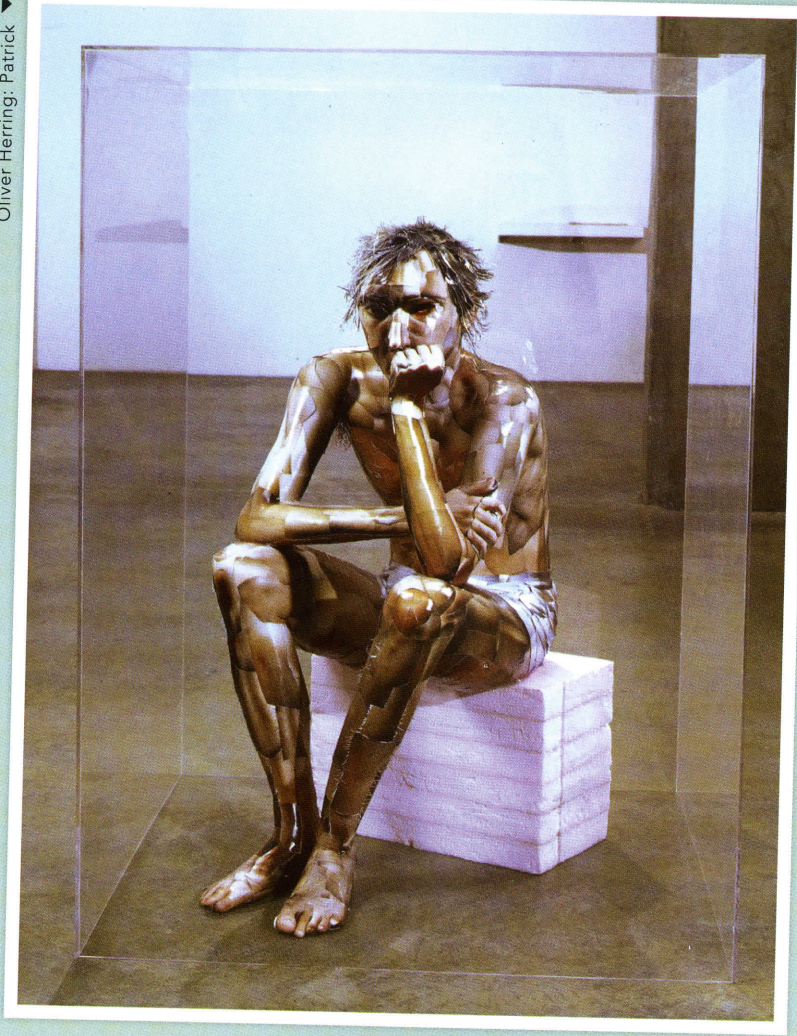
The exhibit includes a few works by Argentine artists from the Arte Light movement in the 90s which deliberately turned away from social commentary and instead produced works that were decorative. After the politically charged works of the 80s, artist such as Jorge Gumier Maier and Omar Shiliro created art that was a withdrawal from the painful realities of the world around them. Maier's baroque looking sculpture "Unlinked" and Shiliro's kitschy yet delicate "Untitled" point to the lightness and joy of their intent.

The show ranges across the multiple forms and styles of contemporary art from the portrait like video work "Anima" by Bill Viola, to the photorealistic painting by Diego Gravinese - "Buenos Aires (I used to love that suicide world)", the combination of painting and sculpture in Peter Rostovsky's "Epiphany Model 5 Expedition", and Trenton Doyle's mixed media jumble "The Painter" and "Loid Struggle for Soul Control". The curators have sampled the best from artists of this continent to produce a survey of the current state of affairs in contemporary art. It is more a wide ranging report than a pointed statement. If anything, that would be a minor weakness of an otherwise strong show. The Blanton's commitment to contemporary art is to be lauded. My hope is that it serves as an anchor for Austin's art scene that is bubbling under the surface and is ready to emerge and be recognized as an integral part of the cultural fabric of Austin.

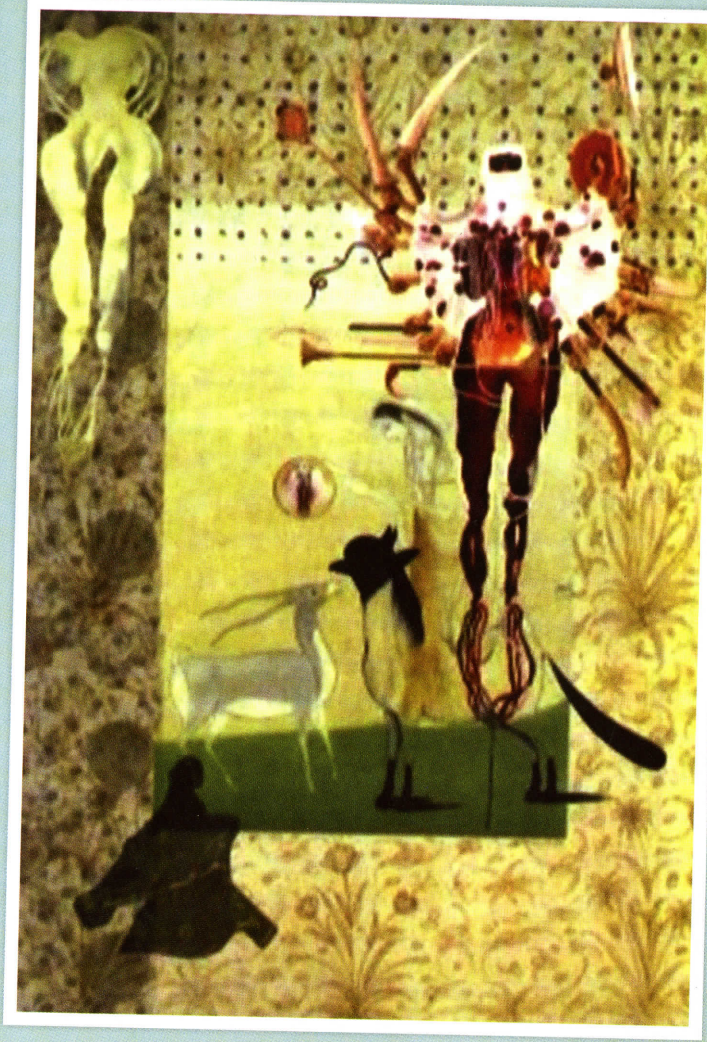
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Oliver Herring: Patrick ▶



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Shahzia Sikander: Intimacy ◀