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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Safe Among Seamless Shadows

By ROBERTA SMITH

PITTSBURGH— The latest Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art here confirms what was evident at the Venice Biennale last summer: the norm for the big, international survey has become a kind of institutionalized, make-nice subversiveness, often expressed in installation-art form that catches the viewer briefly in its headlights through some combination of political correctness, environmental scale and/or dazzling technological effects. But the thrill is always finite, comprehensible and either fun or morally uplifting, digestible and quickly gone.

The Carnegie International attempts to depart from this norm. It is not as completely overrun as the Venice show with installations and video. Neither is it top-heavy with photography, like Documenta X in Kassel, Germany, in 1997. Most wondrous of all, the show, which has been organized by Madeleine Grynsztejn, the Carnegie's curator of contemporary art, has given a lot of space to painting. It is the first of these shows in a several years to acknowledge painting as part of the conversation in the new global art world. It also includes artists who aren't (at least yet) part of the pool of usual suspects that, while larger and more diverse in the newly global art world, tends to dominate these affairs.

Despite all this, the latest Carnegie International (on view through March 26) still feels surprisingly safe, predictable and familiar, like so many shows of this kind. You would think their organizers do little except fly around the world studying one another's exhibitions. The theme here is the way artists deal with our increasingly complex reality, but what you end up thinking about is the seamless, unreal, strangely defanged shadow art world that shows like this conjure up.

You know there's trouble when the two works that make the strongest impression only indirectly reflect the healthiness of contemporary art. One is an installation piece made four years ago by an artist who died two years ago. The other is a 19-minute film so complex, compressed and resonant that it has the impact of a feature and should probably be nominated for some kind of Academy Award. Both these works have what is lacking in much of this show: a touch of divine madness that is visually complex and free of seductive packaging or political cant.

The installation piece is by the German multimedia maverick Martin Kippenberger, who died in 1997 at 43. Titled "The Happy Ending of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika' " and inspired by that novel's

final scene in an employment office, it is a big, colorful sprawl of mismatched, often altered desks and chairs that sits on a big swath of bright green AstroTurf, marked like a soccer field.

The piece occupies the museum's pride of place, its grand columned atrium, where it evokes a riotous, energetically hand-made painting as well as an office full of lunatic bureaucrats, so vividly do the chairs conjure different personalities and contretemps. One hopes that were the artist still alive, he would have gotten the \$10,000 Carnegie Prize, which is awarded by a jury to one of the artists in the show. It went instead to William Kentridge, a South African maker of beautiful if earnest animated films.

Almost equally strong is "QM I Think I Will Call Her QM," a surrealistic short film by Ann-Sofi Siden, 37, an underground filmmaker and installation artist from Sweden. Like a well-constructed short story (that Kafka could have written), it portrays the disintegration of a mentally unstable psychiatrist brilliantly played by Kathleen Chalfant.

This woman spends her days in a squalid Greenwich Village brownstone cursing her colleagues and neighbors and observing on closed-circuit television a giant lizard in the shape of a woman that she keeps locked in a small dungeonlike bedroom. Ms. Siden, who calls the film "a moving picture photo-play" and directed it with Tony Gerger, plays the lizard, slithering convincingly around on the floor, covered to the eyelashes with dry scalelike mud.

Her film is fascinating from an art world viewpoint because it so deftly weaves together elements of performance, video and installation art. The psychiatrist does things like block the windows of the woman's home with tall stacks of books; her second-floor office may be the best installation piece in a film since the apartment that Gene Hackman destroyed stick by stick at the end of "The Conversation.") "QM" is stronger than the video installation that Ms. Siden showed at Venice last summer, but what it is doing in an art exhibition is not quite clear.

There are other isolated moments of madness in this show: Matthew Barney's extravagant film "Cremaster 2," with its rhythmic sweeps of landscape, fetishistic interiors and opaque narrative (definitely not a Hollywood feature); an installation piece by a young German artist named Gregor Schneider that consists of a creepy four-room fragment (Lecteresque basement included) from his home in Rheydt, Germany, which he has been obsessively subdividing into ever smaller rooms and passages since 1985; Kara Walker's scathing silhouetted vaudevillian vignettes of antebellum race relations; and Suchan Kinoshita's plywood shanties, 17 of them, which line the museum's grand staircase. Each shanty is outfitted with used furniture and some kind of surprising visual experience, often scruffy little installation pieces situated on the roof and visible through a mirror.

In addition there is "Ville Fantome," a tabletop city by the Congolese artist Bodys Isek Kingelez that recycles bright plastics and other materials into a carnivalesque array, similar to the Kippenberger in its energy, that slyly mocks modern architecture and imperialism.

As might be expected, several of the big-show newcomers are painters. Among them are the

Americans Alex Katz, Ed Ruscha, John Currin and Laura Owens, the Briton Chris Ofili, of "Sensation" fame, and the German Franz Akermann, represented by 79 maplike watercolors.

For the most part these artists make the show look good and less routine, although they are often at a disadvantage. Three of Mr. Katz's four paintings are spread around the museum's stone-gray lobby; upstairs, the paintings of other artists don't always fare so well in the museum's arctic white-on-white galleries or get lost in the shuffle of bigger, noisier works.

Part of the problem with these big shows may be architectural. Museum structures, built (or renovated) to accommodate large works of art, seem to encourage bigness because it is assumed that only bulk, or the darkness of video art, can contend with so much space. Despite Ms. Grynstejn's efforts, the show's main accomplishment may be the clarity with which it reveals the disturbing ways shows of this type are affecting contemporary art.

A prime example of the comprehensible finiteness that characterizes the works here is "Poetic Justice," a video installation by Kendall Geers, a young South African, that bombards the viewer with howling and brief video images of torture from three commercial movies (including Mel Gibson in "Conspiracy Theory") with his eyes taped open). The effect is briefly horrifying and clearly on the side of right, but the images quickly become routine, like extra-short movie trailers. Add to this the inescapable impression that one is looking at a dumbed-down version of Bruce Nauman's "Clown Torture."

Another problem in this show and elsewhere is the exhaustion factor, reflected in the abundance of artists who have appeared in as many as six shows of this type and aren't represented by their best work here. This includes Diana Thater, Kerry James Marshall, Pierre Huyghe, Sam Taylor-Wood and Shirin Neshat. Ms. Neshat has recently produced a streak of lyrically vehement video installations that confront the separation of the sexes in traditional Islamic culture with dramatic images of anonymous groups of Muslim men and women and traditional music.

But with "Soliloquy" Ms. Neshat presents a vague narrative, starring herself, that seems to center on a woman torn between two religions and includes stunning shots of the artist in imposing architectural settings, one in Turkey, one in the United States.

Resuming the tiresome and simplistic narcissism that characterized her early work, she stares meaningfully into the camera for minutes on end and in one scene portentously washes Persian script off her face and hands. This work exemplifies what happens when political correctness combines with a big budget and high production values: an initially powerful formula is repeated to decreasing effect.

Even outstanding works can be dogged by the familiarity that builds when artists jet from one show to another to create the same engaging effects. Sarah Sze's new installation, a combination of two separate pieces titled "Second Means of Egress" and "Seamless," is one of the show's crazier moments: a meandering network of matchsticks, Q-tips and other modest materials and small

objects that climbs upward, loops across the ceiling, penetrates the opposite wall through a scattering of incisions, and subsides in a vaporizer gently blowing steam through a scroll of metal screening. This combined work is better and certainly bigger than the one Ms. Sze she did at Venice last summer, but ultimately it isn't all that different.

One of the most striking juxtapositions of the show is also one of its more telling: a face-off between Mr. Currin's enigmatic paintings of ivory-skinned nudes and Ernesto Neto's gauzy ivory-colored installation, a long tunnel made of stretchy semitranslucent fabric. With their Mona Lisa smiles, dark Northern Renaissance backgrounds, curvaceous yet oddly chaste bodies, challenging gazes and confusing gestures (15th-century Madonna here, 1940's pinup there) Mr. Currin's beautifully made paintings resist easy interpretation.

Mr. Neto's tunnel is an undeniably sexy "body" of another species. It features pink puckered holes on the outside and soft dangling polyp-shaped bags of plastic-foam pellets on the inside. Attendants invite you to take off your shoes, step inside, walk around a bit and pat and push the hanging bags, an entirely pleasurable experience. When you emerge, you may have enjoyed yourself and feel refreshed. But Mr. Currin's nudes are still there, smiling, teasing, refusing to be deciphered.

Photos: Among the works in the Carnegie International are Ernesto Neto's ivory-colored tunnel and, inset, Martin Kippenberger's "Happy Ending of Franz Kafka's 'Amerika.'" (Associated Press; Richard Stoner/Carnegie Museum of Art [inset])(pg. E1); A large detail of John Currin's "Nude With Raised Arms" at the Carnegie International. (Fred Scruton/Andrea Rosin Gallery)(pg. E6)