

A Peach Of A Leache

Biennial exhibit engages the mind and the senses

As they have in so many regions, cultural interests have kept pace with the growth of Hampton Roads. In Norfolk's case, these interests clearly started with Miss Irene Leache, a young teacher who came to the city with Anna Cogswell Wood in 1870 to open the Leache-Wood Seminary for Young Ladies. More than 120 years later, their influence on the arts in our community is still being felt, as the Chrysler Museum once again hosts the Irene Leache Memorial Biennial Exhibition, now in its 32nd incarnation.

The paintings and sculptures by the 40 artists selected this year by juror Kinshasha Holman Conwill, director of Harlem's influential Studio Museum, display a stylistic variety and creativity that Miss Leache would undoubtedly have appreciated.

The venerable exhibition is meant to recognize regional artists and unveil their accomplishments, and the current installment fulfills those purposes well. But there is far more in this talented assemblage than first meets the eye. Conceptual matters rate high for these artists, whose ambitions are best served by the interiors of museums and galleries, where viewers can readily follow the flow of their ideas. This is not an amateur "regional," in which artists — or those who may claim that status — converge on the designated juror in hope of formal acknowledgment of their specialties. Don't expect to find painted ducks flailing their wings in an idyllic dunescape or still lifes of plastic flowers in polyethylene vases, coated over with plastic atmosphere.

In other words, these are not works of art one would purchase on a boardwalk or in a park to match one's living-room furniture, although many are entirely suitable for private collections. This is instead an art of ideas (some of them quite amusing), an art created primarily for a discerning public.

Charles Ritchie, whose *Night Sky for Martin Lewis* took first place in the competition, displays a uniquely evocative style. This piece, along with his *Backyards at Night* and an untitled diptych, gives the viewer a sense of what truly realistic art can be, conveying intense

feeling rather than depicting a mere representation of fact. The dusky undertone of these works, in which backyards are illuminated by faded streetlamps and distant neighbors' lights, creates a dreamlike quality that envelops the willing viewer in nostalgic memories. One feels both isolated and calmed by images such as these. Their reality is not representationally "pretty," but emotionally inspired.

David Dodge Lewis also avoids prettiness in his triadic images, collectively entitled *Fragment*. With splintered figures reminiscent of those common in Francis Bacon's paintings, these drawings exude a disturbing message about the human condition. Lewis' work is thus not for the faint of heart.

Folk art's primitive common sense (and nonsense) is represented by Geneva Beavers, whose *Animals in a Tropical Landscape* finished third in the competition; although it certainly would rate higher in the eyes of young viewers. Together with Beavers' *Happy Hunting Ground*, this work shows why folk art has remained one of the most popular forms of modern representational painting. Both are executed in vivid acrylics, the peaceable animals depicted seeming quite content to stay put and let their colors leap out of the frame.

David Kohan's *The Village Idiot* tangles images within images, taunting the viewer to discover what is actually present and what is not. A good strategy for the viewer would be to sit patiently in front of this canvas (a convenient bench has been positioned there), awaiting the artist's game plan to emerge from the enigmatic layers. Kohan is adept at playing perceptual games with his audience; hide-and-seek was never so enjoyably frustrating.

A selection of realistic imagery winds up the Chrysler's presentation of Conwill's selections. Rosalie Day White's monoprint *Old Woman Remembers* pays tribute to a grandmotherly type; one can almost hear this time-worn woman's voice recollecting nostalgic images of the past, her words echoing the viewer's own memories. Other works, such as Betsy Campen's '52 Chevy, Gregory A. Willis's *Fulfilling the Dream*, and Nancy Taylor Tallafiero's untitled painting of yet another elderly woman, exert an impact that lingers long after one walks away.

There's not much sculpture in the show, but there's at least one artist fascinated with the three-dimensional process whose work presents a real challenge. Anna Fariello's ceramic piece *After the Pantheon* allows the viewer to assume a godlike, voyeuristic presence while peering into the openings of a small temple and inspecting the tiny illuminated figures within its depths. But for those who wish to indulge in pure fun, in two dimensions, Mike Rowe's entertaining piece, *The Sayings Drawing*, is a must. Every worn-out proverb imaginable is revived with an ironic visual twist, inviting the viewer to spend an amusing hour deciphering its checkerboard clichés.

In fact, more than in most juried exhibitions, the works in the 32nd Irene Leache Biennial demand a certain amount of "audience participation." It's important to let this art seep into one's senses, to be swept away by its provocations — to follow it where it leads, whether that be to a realm of nostalgia, a vague anxiety, or laughter. This is regional art that is both entertaining and intelligent, indicating a significant future for our local talent. One wonders, though, what Miss Leache would have felt strolling through the exhibit's labyrinth: amusement...shock...or both at once?



Charles Ritchie's award-winning *Night Sky for Martin Lewis*, 1993.