

1996

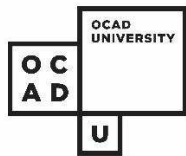
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# 1996 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art

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# 1996 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art

Edmonton Art Gallery & Glenbow Museum, Calgary

The 1996 Alberta Biennial of Contemporary Art is a welcome overview in a province that, for years now, has been mired in factionalism – that of two cities, committed to turning their backs on each other; and of groups, committed to the autonomy of their brand of art. Co-produced by Edmonton Art Gallery curator Bruce Grenville and Glenbow Museum curator Cathy Mastin, the show opened in Edmonton and moves to Calgary in November.

To enter the gallery, one must walk under the work of Edmonton's grand old master of modern sculpture, Peter Hide. His *Malevitch Extended*, at twenty-four feet long, is not really properly visible from the portico. The long, misshapen and thoughtful piece of steel sculpture, is experienced as a hulking gatekeeper, a sphinx of modernism, only too obliging to let the viewer pass.

Inside the gallery, modernism is approached and reproached with the good-natured humility that characterizes this Biennial. Shelley Ouellet's *Rita Hayworth* is a glinting, pixelated picture of the star: black and silver bingo chips attached to a fifteen foot Benday screen. The chips make a small plastic clicking noise as they move in the blast from the air-conditioning duct. In a similar eye-defeating vein is Chris Cran (favourite of Globe & Mail critic John Bentley Mays), who paints imprisoned Ross Bleckner paintings. Subtle swirls are hidden behind perfect, staccato, vertical stripes. On close inspection, these turn out to be the result of the painting being partially masked, re-painted and stripped. Using a simple three-step process, Cran cages paintings containing unmeasured, velvet space.

Given the Hegelian universal time of modernism, it is not surprising that this show, as a catalogue of anti-modern working methods, presents a panoply of temporal strategies.

There is Blair Brennan's conflation of the instantaneous and the extended imagined time of the spirit world: he brands ABRA-CADABRA into the gallery wall. Up close, one can still smell the smoke of singed latex; this is a nice move from gallery-as-temple to gallery-as-body-as-(pagan)-temple. Allen Ball's happily-sentimental *Pop* lands the way-back machine in the 40s – when travel was truly a romantic adventure and the vehicle was iconic enough to be silhouetted on your bedroom's wallpaper. Ball paints images of Art-deco-designed planes, trains and automobiles on the materials of the era: brocade, the cloth cover of a seat, yellow and green linoleum. Other notables (for this surely is a Who's Who of Alberta artists) include relative newcomer Simon Black, whose abstract plywood sculpture is a remarkable, baroque spatial manipulation; and Peter Von Tiesenhasen, whose succinct *Form* (sphere) is a charred wooden ball that has been rolled along a carpet of paper, leaving a Giacometti-like drawing in its wake.

A room-installation by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *The Dark Pool*, is like a walk-in Joseph Cornell box. In it, the compulsive, sensate tides of one's body are given mechanical expression by (Rebecca Horn-esque) flapping machines and gramophone speakers. In one corner, a network of tubes runs from a hospital IV stand to a liquor bottle on the floor and a jerky pulse of dark liquid courses back and forth. A fitting orchestral note to a symphonic show of antagonistic, yet ultimately well-articulated tendencies.

Ryan Whyte



Clockwise from top: Janet Cardiff & Georges Bures Miller, *The Dark Pool* (1995), multi-media installation, photo courtesy Edmonton Art Gallery / Peter Hide, *Malevitch Extended* (1992-96), steel, 203.2 x 823 x 129.5 cm, photo courtesy Glenbow / Margaret May, *Surrender from Voice Series* (1995), lithograph on plaster, burlap and MDF backing, 73.7 x 50.8 cm, photo courtesy Edmonton Art Gallery