

PLAY TIME

The Carnegie International.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



The strikingly thoughtful new edition of the venerable Carnegie International, an exhibition staged every few years at the Carnegie Art Museum, in Pittsburgh, starts outdoors, with two smart bangs. The first dramatizes a change in public art that has been fostered by big biennial-type exhibitions, which now number about two hundred worldwide but were scarce during most of the century that followed the birth of the original, the Venice Biennale, in 1895, and of the Carnegie International, a year later. It involves “Tip,” an immense jungle of boards wrapped with scraps of wire mesh, slathered with cement and paint, and festooned with

strips of brightly colored cloth, by the British sculptor Phyllida Barlow. The work swarms a hundred and thirty-one feet across a plaza, almost to the museum’s front doors, passing within inches of “Carnegie,” a thirty-nine-foot-high tower of four inward-leaning, rust-surfaced steel slabs, which was created by Richard Serra for the 1985 International, and then acquired by the museum. “Carnegie,” by my lights, is great original art, while Barlow’s “Tip” is a pastiche of installational foofaraw. But Barlow’s up-to-date caprice easily mortifies Serra’s canonical dignity, as if dragging a samurai into a pillow fight. “Tip” lacks cohesion and scale; the piece feels both all over the

place and scarcely there at all. This is not a failure. It epitomizes an anti-formal sass, often laced with soft-core political messaging, that has flourished in periodic big shows since the nineteen-eighties. If you want to interpret the Barlow as feminist versus the Serra as macho, that’s more than allowed. But you can as readily see the juxtaposition, like much else in the exhibition, as a self-aware specimen of festivalist cheek. As I said, this show is thoughtful.

The second out-front provocation extends the character of the first to a witty, surprisingly substantial extreme. It is a piece of playground equipment: a huge, colorful, snaking tunnel, with kid-size apertures. A small girl was happily playing on it when I visited. At least as effective, visually and architecturally, as most public sculpture, the piece was created by the Swiss designer and artist Yvan Pestalozzi, in 1972. It advertises the most unusual feature of this International: an elaborate show within the show, called “The Playground Project,” which documents the history, current development, and future prospects of urban playgrounds. In a warren of rooms with raw-plywood walls, models, photographs, videos, and texts immerse viewers in the art and science of fun for fun’s sake. You’d need a team of specialists to parse the ideas advanced and the issues raised, including the perennial scrap between safety-first fussy budgets and condoners of a little thrilling peril. But even a visitor pressed for time won’t miss the rhetorical challenge: calling the bluff of a frequent slur on biennials, that they are trivial playgrounds for jaded sophisticates. The curators Daniel Baumann, Dan Byers, and Tina Kukieliski (and Gabriela Burkhalter, for playgrounds) chose not to name this International, a survey of forty artists from nineteen countries, but it might justly be titled “What’s Entertainment?” Where, if anywhere, is the red line between art that pleases admirably and art that only panders? The question arises at a time when commercial art fairs have eclipsed public festivals as the main stages of a globalized art world. What can curators do that marketers can’t? The Carnegie crew proves that festivalism can, in itself, be made artistic by honestly exposing its conventions as background for the quiddities of individual artists.

One advantage of festivals is the chance to exploit the physical and the

Phyllida Barlow’s “Tip,” installed next to Richard Serra’s “Carnegie.”

cultural peculiarities of the host institution. The Carnegie Art Museum, which opened in 1907, besides offering a major Serra to goof with, has two unusual rooms that winningly complicate the meanings of large pseudo paintings by the American artist Wade Guyton, made by rendering digital designs on canvases pulled through glitch-prone digital printers. Four mostly blank, beautiful Guytons, redolent of nostalgia for bygone modern styles of abstraction, hang in a ruined former coatroom. Paint-stripped walls, exposed wires, orphaned furniture, and glue patches left by ripped-up carpeting provide a sympathetic chorus of wistful desolation. Meanwhile, four Guyton canvases bearing fuzzy imagery of flames lean against a wall in the lavishly wood-paneled and gilded Founder's Room; its gold ceiling has been blackened by, I imagine, decades of cigar smoke, dating from Andrew Carnegie's first meetings there with his cronies. Whatever the market worth of the Guytons (his work has lately fetched considerable sums), they will never deliver more value in haunting humor than they do here.

Another of the several solo installations in this International profitably occupies the wraparound balcony of the museum's Hall of Sculpture, which is usually adorned with plaster casts of ancient Greek and Roman statues. The polymorphic latter-day Expressionist Nicole Eisenman has retained some of those, interspersing them with wacky and alarming plaster figures of her own. Nineteen of her oil paintings of pansexual ribaldry and bohemian saloon society line the walls. This visitation of the raucous on the classical is impolite but feels oddly collegial; I can fancy Eisenman hanging out, after hours, with Phidias and the rest. Elegant string-and-percussion music rises from the room below. The source is an array of eight mechanized sculptures by the Mexican artist Pedro Reyes, made from pistols, assault rifles, machine guns, and grenade cases that the Mexican government confiscated from drug cartels and gave to him. The translation of instruments of death into instruments of computer-programmed plink-a-plunk may seem awfully arch, but it captivates when you see it and hear it: festivalism in excelsis.

Patrolling the frontier of art and entertainment is a notable installation, by the New Yorker Taryn Simon, of a

hundred and ninety jewel-like color photographs of all the weapons and vehicles, and most of the actresses (as they appear now), from the James Bond movies. The ensemble's title, "Birds of the West Indies," is a bit of arcana: Ian Fleming named his spy after an ornithologist, James Bond, who wrote a book of the same title. Like Reyes's arsenal, Simon's index suggests a high concept chasing its tail, in a form familiar from myriad conceptualist stunts of the past half century. Such apparent art-historical amnesia, like the dishevelled aesthetics of Phyllida Barlow, typifies recent contemporary art. Today, we see ever less that smacks of tradition and influence and ever more of what amounts to fungible brands. The condition could do with a name. I suggest Neo-Mannerism, after another era—the one between the Renaissance and the Baroque—that cycled generic styles, sometimes brilliantly. Resistance to its avatars is likely futile, not to mention spoilsport, when the results are as funny and as gorgeous as Simon's "Birds."

While giving a Neo-Mannerist élite its due, the International also emphasizes a counterforce: outsiders. The show's most jolting galleries present a large selection of fantastic drawings by the nomadic Chicagoan Joseph Yoakum (1890-1972); a diorama in which the contemporary French artist Pierre Le Guillon has arrayed thirty-one ceramics by George E. Ohr, "the mad potter of Biloxi" (1857-1918), along with some period photographs; and nine boldly brushed, spectacular paintings by Henry Taylor, a living populist master whose subjects range from heroes of black history to regular people in his Los Angeles neighborhood. When, as now, sincerity seems schooled out of professional artists, the straight stuff of it in demotic work becomes a heart's oasis. It has been argued of late, most forcefully by Roberta Smith, in the *Times*, that museums should abandon their ostracism of outsider and folk art. If our emotional and spiritual uses for art matter beyond our pleasures in formal sophistication, and I think they do, the point is impeccable. The support given it by this International reflects a catholic and very timely sense of values. Now that just about anything might be done and called art, let it only be done well. ♦