

StarTribune

Harvest of art

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One of the eternal verities of the Minnesota State Fair is that the art show is always classy. This year's edition meets the mark with 386 pieces picked from 1,979 entries by a distinguished jury of artists, instructors and museum staff, including the Walker Art Center's new director, Olga Viso.

A veteran judge of art competitions nationwide, Viso said she was delighted to be asked to assess the sculpture entries and was impressed by the mix of professional and amateur artists.

"It's wonderful to see so much interest in art and culture," said Viso, although she was "kind of disappointed" there was nothing distinctively Minnesotan about the sculpture entries. As a newcomer, she had hoped the fair would help her "to understand the cultural landscape here." But she was still enthusiastic.

Were there any pieces that could end up at the Walker? "Quite possibly," she said.

Smart sculpture

The show is divided into eight categories: paintings, sculpture, watercolors, drawings, prints, ceramics/glass, textiles and photography.

Among the show's standout sculptures are witty pieces with a sharp, conceptual edge. John Ilg of Woodbury was awarded first prize for a wall sculpture that will test visitors' integrity. It consists of a galvanized steel grid into which he stuffed rolled-up dollar bills to spell out the word "Honesty." Nothing but that virtue will prevent visitors from pilfering the money. We'll see, at the fair's end, how Minnesotans have dealt with temptation.

Nestled among a lot of urban paintings, John E. Roy's "American Iron Icons" mixes media as deftly as did Joseph Cornell, whose famous dioramas must have been an inspiration. The artist from Little Canada has assembled in a plexiglass case dozens of cut-out photos of cars, gas pumps, motel facades and road signs plus some real toys and flotsam -- harmonicas, a length of barbed wire. A deftly organized 3-D collage, "Icons" is a loving tribute to mid-20th-century automotive culture and gaudy design extravagance.

On a more humorous note, St. Paul artist Howie Wold's "Homage to Rube" consists of a rubber duck in a garbage can lid and a bucket of golf balls atop a rickety Goldberg-esque structure through which the balls run. Can't tell if he's satirizing the fair's



John E. Roy of Little Canada earned a first-place award with this deftly organized 3-D collage.

Joey Mcleister, Star Tribune



Rebecca Yaker of Minneapolis cleverly straddles the fine line between kitsch and culture with her award-winning "Sock Monkeys in a Meat Grinder."

Joey Mcleister, Star Tribune



John Ilg of Woodbury created this winning piece from dollar bills, galvanized steel and wood.

Joey Mcleister, Star Tribune

rides or poking fun at contemporary sculpture (or both).

Rebecca Yaker of Minneapolis also cleverly straddles that fine line between kitsch and culture with her award-winning "Sock Monkeys in a Meat Grinder," which poses a conjoined-twins sock monkey (one body, two heads) with one limb in an Oster grinder that's spewing out tweedy brown monkey yarn. Aesthetes will think immediately of Mike Kelley's abject sock dolls in the Walker's collection; knitters may think otherwise.

Sculpture is a rewarding category this year: Eileen Cohen's pert "Easter," a pair of ceramic rabbit ears clad in fuchsia flocking, would do Jeff Koons proud; Maggie DeRee evokes contemporary wars with a pair of boots covered with military slogans and news clips, and Eva Christopherson's "Spill," a bucket spewing doll parts embedded in flesh-colored goo, can have many environmental, sexual and political interpretations.

Well-conceived displays

The show's installation crew, under the supervision of Fine Arts superintendent Bob Meyer, deserves kudos for its helpful thematic arrangements.

There's a large bay of urban scenes, including John Salminen's moodily evocative watercolor "Midtown Reflections" and Chuck Arnold's panoramic photo "Collapse," in which the disastrously pancaked I-35W bridge is the haunting centerpiece of a glorious vista of the Minneapolis skyline.

Other walls and niches are filled with painted, drawn and watercolored still lifes, portraits of trees, landscapes, religious motifs, waterscapes, figure studies, abstractions, dolls, vegetables and birds (ravens, crows and blackbirds mostly with curiously few songbirds. Is there a political or environmental message here?). There's even one whole wall of waterfalls and another of pink flamingo things, among which "No Country for Old Motels," Jeff Baker's tribute to a decaying pink hostelry, gets the Best Title award.

As always, craft and design skill are exemplary throughout, and traditional techniques generally trump innovation. Still, Nadia Alenov of St. Paul has created an unusually luminous portrait of a magnificent snow-covered tree by inventively glazing a digital photo with shimmering encaustic (pigment in wax). Carole Nesheim of Northfield, Minn., takes the art of rug-hooking to new heights in "Joseph," a beautifully designed and executed interpretation of the biblical story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. And in her watercolor of a young man dreaming in long grass, Tara K. Sweeney of St. Paul evokes the beauty of a summer day with keen observation and rare grace.

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The disastrously pancaked I-35W bridge is the haunting centerpiece of a panoramic vista of Minneapolis' skyline in Chuck Arnold's photo "Collapse."

Feed Loader, Star Tribune

STATE FAIR FINE ARTS EXHIBITION

What: 386 paintings, sculpture, watercolors, prints, drawings, photos, textiles, ceramics and glass picked from 1,979 entries.

When: Ends Sept. 1.

Where: Fine Arts Center, corner of Randall Av. and Cosgrove St., State Fairgrounds.

Review: Always a class act, the fair show again delivers an impressive mix of professional and amateur talent with strong landscape painting, witty sculpture, an impressive range of photos, fresh watercolors, and a dash of fine crafts.

Tickets: Free with fair admission. 651-642-2301 or mnstatefair.org.