

AUSTIN
TEXAS BIENNIAL
MULTIPLE VENUES

Encompassing 73 Texas artists from small towns as well as metropolitan centers, the bulk of the third Texas Biennial consisted of two large thematic group shows and four regional solo exhibitions, all held at six nonprofit and artist-run venues throughout the city. Guest-curator Michael Duncan, a Los Angeles-based art critic and curator (and *A.i.A.* corresponding editor), selected participants from an open call, which resulted in 650 submissions, amplified by wide-ranging studio visits. While several of the biennial artists show at commercial galleries, the majority are unknown to the wider art world.

Kelly Fearing was chosen as the biennial's "Tribute Artist." A 90-year-old painter and professor emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin, he was represented in both group shows with paintings from 1948 through 2009. Known for images of lonely saints and mystics communing with nature, his work is characterized by fanciful draftsmanship and tapestrylike compositions. For Duncan, Fearing's paintings are emblematic of the isolation and independence of the Texas artists he admires.

"DIY: Double-Wide" appeared at Women & Their Work gallery and featured paintings, drawings, photographs, sculpture and video that often involved depictions or interpretations of nature. Images of natural disasters (cyclones, for example) recurred, as did spiritually idealized landscapes, including several mandalas and a beaded wall-hanging of an Asian-inspired landscape. Beau Comeaux's nighttime photograph (no date) of a cluster of trees overtaken by kudzu was a standout, with its yellow light, purple sky and clarity of detail creating an eerily artificial scene.

"Eye to Eye" at the Mexican American Cultural Center [MACC] was devoted to representations and abstractions of the body. A highlight here was the Austin-based Heyd Fontenot. In the painting *Big Lori/Big Tony* (2008), five caricaturelike figures with sketchy nude bodies and fully modeled expressive heads are intertwined in the center of the canvas. Among the few digital works was Ivan Lozano's 2007 video, *Paul (For Peter and Luke)*, a time-stretched, digitally processed clip of Paul Newman's head—blue eyes blinking in slow motion—appropriated from the 1967 film *Hombre*.

On the grounds of the MACC, Sasha Dela strung colorful Mylar streamers from light poles, as if decorating a used-car lot. The six other outdoor projects, all selected by curator Risa Puleo, were installed near Lady Bird Lake and included Ken Little's white picket fence outlining the shape



Ivan Lozano: *Paul (For Peter and Luke)*, 2007, digital video, approx. 3½ minutes.

of the continental United States and Bill Davenport's giant cement mushrooms.

To provide more in-depth exposure, one artist was chosen from the north, south, east and west of Texas to have a solo exhibition, each at a different venue. The most engaging for this viewer was William Cannings at Okay Mountain. He exhibited steel sculptures of life-size inflatable objects, like inner tubes, beach balls and rafts, which he makes by heating metal sheets and shaping them with forced air. Painted in shiny enamel, the works convincingly capture the puckered seams and puffed-out shapes of the artist's motifs. Unlike Jeff Koons's works, Cannings's are actual size, thick and glossy rather than thin and glassy. The weighty material is rendered buoyant and airy, like the show as a whole. In addition, Lee Baxter Davis exhibited detailed Western-themed ink drawings of partially dressed and frequently armed men and women at Pump Project, and Jayne Lawrence presented totemic sculptural assemblages at Mass Gallery. Kelli Vance showed titillating Photo-Realist paintings of her female friends in suburban interiors at Big Medium. In his catalogue, Duncan notes that "fake homoeroticism" inspires the Houston-based

Vance. Her canvases, as with most of the works in the biennial, are primarily vehicles for storytelling. The abundance of conceptual complexity and formal inventiveness in the work of Texas's better-known artists was trumped here by personal expression.

Partial to narrative painting and, especially, Magic Realism, Duncan has a record of championing sincere, underrecognized artists. The biennial provided him with the opportunity to pursue his agenda on a large scale, with considerable gusto.

—Frances Colpitt

Kelly Fearing: *Spirit Deer at a Yellow Edge*, 1970, oil on linen, 22 by 28 inches.



The 2009 Texas Biennial was on view Mar. 6-Apr. 11.