Phoenix Biennial is important and challenging

By Robert S. Cauthom  
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REVIEW

What: Phoenix Biennial  
Where: Phoenix Art Museum, 1625 N. Central Ave., Phoenix  
When: Tuesdays-Saturdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sundays, 1-5 p.m., until Oct. 4

Phoenix — "At the time when we come close to extinction, there will be intervention," drones the man in the small white tent. He talks to a woman, flashing oddly and craftedly by flying saucers, aliens, knickknack shelf of a century of genius. Melancholy pervades the piece, yet beneath it one discovers a redemptive icon for the worship of human brilliance. Here is an intervention to the chilling of our 20th-century souls.

Many other artists ponder the interventions of art. Painters Dan Riddle, Carl Johansen and several more in the show reconsider cubism and the work of Pablo Picasso with sometimes unsteady results, while sculptor Allan Graham delivers an odd and delightful tribute to T.S. Eliot in "Constellation Eliot," which is plastered with pages from his poem "The Wasteland."

In a way, these works are doing in a larger sense more interesting than the individual pieces they produce.

By quoting from art history in their work, they both comment on the earlier art and ask whether these earlier events have any real relevance today. They invite us to consider how cubism and Picasso fare in the '90s — as contemporary art, sans the protective muffler of history.

It's a little like the fascination of children going through a trunk and trying on their parents' old clothes and looking at that shock of connection with the past and the feeling of being a grown-up.

Working in more personal directions, there is a generally rainy-day sort of yearning in Tucson. Hope Day's oil-and-tar paintings on weathered plywood.

In these gracious pieces, Day presents a number of smaller images within each picture: a bit of mountain here, a Grecian face there, a shadowy rendering of a desert bush. Day's paintings emerge almost as a portrait of a mind at work, each element the equivalent of insistent flashes of bittersweet memory.

This biennial's grasp is large and it includes works of many themes, from the unadulterated joyfulness of Jim Wald's bewitching "Sea Ania," to solid works of mixed-media sculpture and installations.

New Mexico video artist Steina Vasulka's "Scapes of Paradoxy" is a two-screen meditation on the contrasts of water, ice, rock and desert. Video also plays a part in Tempe artist Dan Collins' clever "Virtual America III.

In a sculpture of green Sheetrock and a videocamera, viewers discover that what looks like an abraded smear on the work's surface becomes a map of the United States through the distortion of the video eye. Again, TV imagines America.

Another Tempe artist, Lew Alquist, has installed the topical "Hot Lunch." Sitting in a cruelly lighted room, a black table rocks back and forth on a base that appears to be a coffin stand; on the table a mustard-yellow plate of Fiestaware manufactured with a radioactive glass slide back and forth, activating Geiger counters on the table. When we come close to extinction, our environment will become poisonous.

There are disappointing works, too, such as video artist Bruce Nauman's grueling, clownish hell of "Dark and Stormy Night." Several artists also hang works that do little more than ape current New York fashions. These include Jeff DeLude's "Confrontation Brulée," a narrative painting that buys into cheap melodrama.

Similarly, Raul Guerrero's "Recuerdos de Acapulco" is like a limp trap of various hip styles, while taking the general form of an homage to the paintings of poor, misguided Eric Fischl.

Ironically, there is a point to including even these pictures, because they serve what seems to be the larger purpose of this exhibition.

Rather than just asking artists to large to enter slides, as was done in the past, Bruce Kurtz, the museum's gifted curator of 20th-century art, toured the region, visited artists' studios and invited them to show their work.

Kurtz has done a painstaking job. What we see here is a consideration of how Southwestern artists participate in the national dialogue of art. So along with the works inspired directly by experience in the region, we also find the influences of New York and Europe on the walls.

The show is a complicated melange of the intellect, dark emotion, cultural manipulation and anything-goes daring that has characterized art of the '80s. There is something here to anger and frighten almost everyone.

But this is an estimable show with something to challenge us and make us think. And that is, after all, a central part of our duty.