The art is Southwest, the concepts New York

By JOSEPH YOUNG

The 1987 Phoenix Biennial exhibition differs from those held in the past in that Colorado and Utah artists are no longer represented. Instead, we find works of art created in Texas and California. According to Bruce D. Kurtz, Curator of 20th Century Art, "The Museum staff felt that representing these two important states of our region would significantly enhance the Phoenix Biennial."

Certainly there is much to criticize about individual works in the show, the poorly written but still informative catalogue and even the qualitatively uneven exhibition itself. Nevertheless, of nearly seventy works on view there are nine that are first rate including: John Baldessari's Watched Suspiciously, a hand-colored, two-part enlargement of a movie still photograph; David Bates' Purple Gallinule, a large stylized landscape of a swamp and birds; Dan Collins' Virtual America III, a minimal-looking green sculpture surrounded by a video camera which records the "damaged" surface of the sculpture and transmits this view to a tiny video screen where the camera view becomes a map of the United States; Hug Day's element mixed-media abstractions made from discarded construction materials; Jill Giegerich's untitled painting portraying a mechanical-looking turquoise female torso; Allan Graham's Gates, which bridges the gap between painting and sculpture; Real Guerrero's painting Shadows which incorporates three dimensional birds and a real cuckoo clock; Jim Wad's Ecstatic Dance, an acrylic-on-canvas painting, which approaches but does not quite equal his masterpiece earlier shown at the Yarens Gallery; and Steina Vasulka's Scapes of Paradoxy, two video screens presenting seemingly magically transformed landscapes.

Regrettably, most of these works are clustered at the end of the exhibition. And instead of having a positive first impression of the show we find that before we even enter the museum we are annoyed by John Connell's Waterbirds, a tableau of birds perching on a large black wall with white exhibition text. Inside the museum matters do not at first improve. Behind a black wall with white exhibition text we find a small room with two television monitors playing simultaneously. Sometimes the two screens show the same clown with red hair rambling on about three people sitting around a campfire and one tells a story about three people sitting around a campfire and one tells a story about... Entitled A Dark and Stormy Night this sixty minute video by Bruce Nauman was created in 1977 and once again evidence the sophomoric which has typified this artist's oeuvre since its inception.

In a gallery to the left of the video presentation are three neat looking drawings by Mike Kelley including one of Saturn devouring one of his children. On a facing wall we see enlargements of these forgettable pictures covered with green pleather.

Bert Long's Van Gogh incorporates a huge frame around a blackboard and a shell at the bottom of the composition supporting various objects including a human brain in a jar. Unfortunately, Long's pictures seem no more than contemporary excursions into Surrealism which somehow never seems to die even through the art movement lost its intellectual vigor nearly half a century ago.

One of the most offensive works on view, at least for this viewer, is Bill Lundberg's Con Tent, a wooden tent with its sides covered with canvas. Inside the "tent" we see a brown tarp on the floor suggesting an open sleeping bag and at the end of the "tent" we see a projected blurred silhouette of a man and a woman talking while a recording of their conversation has the man talking incessantly about radiation, aliens, and God knows what else while the woman's comments are generally confined to "Mmm" and "Deeoo". In what should be a post-feminist age such a flash back to male chauvinism in the guise of a verbal/visual pun seems retarded at best.

Nancy O'Conner's Hot Iron Sharp Knife incorporates six large color images of the same black man in a denim outfit and wearing a cowbow hat. In the bottom brown paper border of the composition is a childish inscription which we hope unintentionally suggests that blacks are culturally and intellectually inferior to whites.

Michael Maglich's Desert Nudes is three miniature female torsos complete with explicit genitalia and breasts, wooden branches for legs and medieval looking helmets seeming to cover their heads. Individually colored red, white or blue and mounted on the wall like giant insects, these female-insulting works cry out for their male counterparts to be similarly humiliated in the guise of art.

Donald Judd, justly famous twenty years ago, is represented by an untitled work from 1966 that looks like a cheap multiple created out of a series of colored metal "Kleenex" boxes. His untitled floor piece from 1977 is hardly better, resembling seven puny permutations of an aluminum box.

Tim Etchells is represented by two large works whose chief intent seems to reside in their being lent by influential collectors. Color One #12 is a picture composed of sixteen postcards, four of which have been painted with a greasy substance. The other work is an untitled sculpture of a table upon which are placed two small electric motors, a photograph, a pair of scissors, and an abstract drawing in red ink.
Birds welcome Biennial patrons

By VICTORIA BEAUDIN

The cranes nesting on and flying off the Phoenix Art Museum roof have not flown the marshes for the desert sun. They are actually the work of New Mexico artist John Connell, one of many artists in the "Phoenix Biennial." Connell's piece Waterbirds, however, is not a preview of the work inside. Whereas the majority of the artists in the Biennial are having discussions about the world, Connell is carrying on a conversation of his own.

The Chinese term "Yin and Yang," the two principles which refer to the active and passive or opposite roles in nature, is one of the better descriptions of John Connell's personality.

When he initially meets someone he is so shy he hesitates to look into their eyes. Yet once he begins talking he doesn't stop, excitedly jumping from subject to subject. All the topics are relevant but they don't make sense until he has ended the discussion because inevitably he returns to the topic to complete his thought.

Usually he inserts personal aphorisms such as, "Faute est un sacre de la bouche," which sound great even though one has to stop and think about it.

Unlike most of the pieces in the show, Waterbirds is site-specific. Connell first looked at the museum location approximately six weeks prior to the show's opening. From this visit he made six drawings for six different sites. For logistical reasons the roof was decided upon.

Once these drawings were given an initial okay, or anything to the artist "approved to be approved" by the city, he began to create. Within a period of fifteen days he made six masks, and by the end of it all birds a day. When Connell was creating the project, his only criteria was achieving his "vision." He didn't take into account the length and weight of the birds or how he was going to transport them.

In talking about his creative vision, where he has ideas that don't leave, he said, "My stuff comes from somewhere...whether I want it to or not."

Hoping to clarify his point be added, "It's not like being insane. It's just that sometimes one is asked to make something." The painting of the man he was sitting to get his cable approved by the city engineer. Although he wasn't worried about getting the project passed, he made a point to state that he refused to make his art according to someone else's specifications.

On another topic he stated, "I do what I want to do, and somehow it gets accepted." In reference to Waterbirds he could have said, "I do what I want to do, and somehow it gets completed."

Connell, in his own words, has a big van. But it was difficult accommodating 23 cranes, most of which have six feet wing span. This is not taking into account the length of their necks.

Connell studied as many as he could inside the van. Those that didn't fit he strapped to the roof without any protection. According to the artist, "I thought I would give them a wind tunnel test. They got here all right. One had a broken neck, but it's easy to fix. They're just made of plaster, chicken wire, and cloth."

As nonchalant as he is about transporting his-birds, it's another thing for the artist to arrange the pieces. Connell spent a better part of a week on the roof when the average temperature was 110 degrees.

"Even though I'm grumbling about the heat, it's my choice. When I'm finished I'll be much happier. I could never have someone else put these things together. I have the belief in sensitivity to light. The time spent doing it makes a difference." Putting the piece together is part of the vision.

Connell's art is so realistic, especially when compared to the art inside, one can't help but wonder how it fits in.

Curator Bruce Kurtz doesn't think Connell's work is very different. Kurtz believes that several pieces in the show are like Connell's in that they refer to the metaphysical and spiritual aspects of life.

Connell, on the other hand, doesn't discuss his art according to what his contemporaries are doing, but speaks of it in its own terms. He believes his art is part of the "perennial aesthetic." According to the artist, "The only thing contemporary about it is that it is being done now, and the way certain parts of the body are expressed. It's like seeing that instant now."

Connell began incorporating birds into his abstract paintings approximately 25 years ago when he was a young artist living in New York.

He moved to New Mexico in the mid-1960's. Ten of those years were on a farm where he worked on his art. But rarely exhibited it. Most of the pieces were woodcarvings and paintings, "all sort of nature oriented."

Connell stated, "I've worked completely isolated for years. A younger artist might be influenced by the current art world. But I don't read those magazines. Not out of smoothness, I just have an awful lot to do. I don't know if I thrive on feedback."

Carl Johan, another artist whose work is in the Biennial, works in the same studio space. According to Connell, "I appreciate what he does, but it doesn't rub off."

More than anything Connell is surprised by his success. "I'm one of those artists people laughed at. When I first made the birds I would spill the plaster and leave it. People asked why I didn't toilet them. By the time I got used to it, people weren't laughing anymore."

Without needing to the art market, he is his own critic. "I'm making what I would have made anyway," Connell has achieved success. To him it "seems improbable that I can still do what I do. Everything I've made I've sold. That's what's so unusual."

What's he going to do after the flush of the exhibition opening? Connell is going home to work on his garden. "Art is supposed to be uplifting, but gardening is more peaceful."