

# REPORT FROM SANTA FE I

## A Slow-Motion Biennial

*In a striking departure from most such exhibitions, the current SITE Santa Fe Biennial focuses on a small number of artists, many of them in midcareer.*

BY FRANCES COLPITT

A welcome alternative to the spectacularization (in the Debordian sense of “an ever-growing mass of image-objects”) plaguing comparable international exhibitions, the works included in the Sixth International Biennial at SITE Santa Fe are serious and difficult. The majority of the individual pieces and installations require and reward a commitment to lengthy contemplation. While it would be possible, but not in the least beneficial, to breeze through Wolfgang Laib’s softly lit gallery containing three majestic staircase-shaped sculptures, the visual and conceptual—and especially the ethical and spiritual—complexity of the works cannot be apprehended without an expenditure of time. The duration of experience is palpable and itself a component of the exhibition, placing the viewer in a complementary relationship to the works, the exhibition and the curator.

Klaus Ottman, an independent curator and critic based in New York, revealed his intentions for the biennial in a press conference, a panel discussion with the artists on opening weekend and numerous interviews in Santa Fe publications. The exhibition has no theme, he explained, in order to focus attention on the artists and their art rather than on the curator. As any curator knows, thematic exhibitions skew the viewing experience by typically foregrounding a shared subject matter or medium at the expense of each work’s uniqueness. Ottman’s attitude is extremely generous and, I have to say, it succeeded. His choice of an exhibition title, “Still Points of the Turning World,” was more fortuitous: only after finalizing the concept for the exhibition did he find the line in T.S. Eliot’s *Burnt Norton*.

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards, at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from  
nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. . . .

Ottman’s thoughtful catalogue essay expands on the experiential aspect of the exhibition. “This Biennial attempts to insert a temporary still point between Presence and Presentation, between unmediated experience and interpretation.” Drawing on American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, Ottman identifies presence as “secondness,” after possibility and before futurity. He also turns to Daniel Buren’s text “The Function of the Studio,” published in 1973, to explain how, by working in situ, Buren collapses a work’s execution (in the studio) and presentation (in the museum) into pure presence. In his exhibition, Ottman is wary of presentation, which he identifies with interpretation and knowledge; the show eschews didactic text panels or audio guides, leaving viewers to come to grips with the works on their own.

Facilitating complete immersion in the individual works, Ottman created separate rooms or “still points” for each artist in SITE Santa Fe’s 18,000-square-foot warehouse space, which allowed him to design just 13 spaces of varying sizes. This determined the number of invited participants. His selection process involved a somewhat



*Still from video of Patty Chang’s untitled performance, Galisteo, N.M., July 9, 2006.*

democratic representation of contemporary mediums, including painting, sculpture, installation, photography, video, sound and performance, and a diversity of nationality and gender. To the benefit of his American audience, Ottman, German-born and a longtime U.S. resident, is clearly intimate with European art. Countering the youthful and trendy modalities of recent biennials, the exhibition includes a serious mix of midcareer artists. None of the works have been exhibited before in the United States and four, by Miroslaw Balka, Patty Chang, Robert Grosvenor and Cristina Iglesias, were created specifically for the biennial. Ottman appears to have chosen artists who are known for the inspirational depth of their work and the intensity of the experience it engenders.

The first large gallery one encounters is shared by Grosvenor and Iglesias, whose works are separated by a partial wall and substantial space for cross traffic. Iglesias’s *Santa Fe (Celosia I)* and *Santa Fe (Celosia II)*, 2006, consist of tall clay lattice screens that create an open, meandering labyrinth. Formed into medium-size blocks containing angular letters, the dark red ceramic has a sandy, handmade texture. Small ceiling-mounted spotlights dapple the darkened space as the light passes through the letter-forms. The letters themselves are easy to make out; not so the text, which was to me illegible. It derives, we’re told in the catalogue, from *Historia Natural y Moral de las Indias*, a history of the New World by a 16th-century Jesuit missionary. Passing through the narrow spaces of the labyrinth, one is fully engaged: attempting to decipher the words and enchanted by the ornamental patterns and flickering light from the movement of the visitor’s body. The installation is as quiet as a church and as intricate as a Moorish screen. Architectural references

and the use of light abound in this midcareer Spanish artist’s work, well summarized by the *Celosias*, the Spanish word for jealousies or window shutters.

Grosvenor came to prominence in the 1960s with monumental, cantilevered sculptures. These were followed by sculptures in burnt wood, spray-painted metal and chain-link fencing, expressing a sense of deflated geometry and urban-industrial malaise. Providing the point of departure for Grosvenor’s contribution to the biennial, *Quadrum* (2005-06), a third body of work, consists of tableaux composed of discrete abstract elements, each painted in a strange tint or neutral color. *Quadrum* offers no codes nor potential for narrative. Its difficulty, in the context of this exhibition, is its sublime resistance to interpretation. Instead, it pays quirky homage to major issues of 20th-century sculpture. Brancusi is evoked by the huge, brown, low-slung elliptical drum—a base integrated into the sculpture—supporting a flat, cornflower blue fiberglass cartoon-bubble shape. Two sets of freestanding metal elements, painted brown, and placed adjacent to the base-and-bubble, recall David Smith’s use of welding to attach differently shaped sections of steel. In each set, four identical vertical halved lengths of pipe (or rolled steel) are elevated on square metal supports of different heights. The pipes’ heights are also differently configured in the two sets. Suggesting a pipe organ or notes on a staff, the freestanding elements contribute a lyrical quality to the composition. Finally, *Quadrum* recalls the bold colors and simple, playful forms of British sculpture of the ’60s, particularly that of Anthony Caro.

Tucked away in the loading dock next to the entrance to SITE Santa Fe is Miroslaw Balka’s *Bottom* (2004). As he has for other works, Balka here employed black and white video footage filmed at the former Majdanek Nazi concentration camp in Poland. According to Ottman,

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Balka's work was created in remembrance of the 8,000 Jews from Balka's hometown of Otwock, Poland, who were sent to the death camp at Treblinka. Projected onto a thick layer of salt in the bottom of the recessed black cube of the loading dock is a grainy video that follows a grid of ceiling-mounted plumbing and shower heads in Majdanek. As one leans over the plumbing pipe railing to view the video, disorientation and aridity are inescapable sensations. A second small gallery contains swags of paper chains, made from folded sections of the obituaries in the Santa Fe newspaper. The proximity of these deaths serves to bring the reality of the Polish death camps closer. As Ottman remarks in the catalogue, "One cannot come to terms with one's life without trying to apprehend one's death."

**W**angechi Mutu's *Magic* (2006) also has an undercurrent of death and mourning. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1972, Mutu was educated at Cooper Union and Yale. Her collage drawings of decoratively garbed or tattooed, emaciated female figures and especially her densely layered installations are poetic meditations on the body, mutilation and ritual. *Magic* takes place in a large black room with a cloth video screen set at a slight angle at one end, plastic water bottles and lightbulbs suspended from the ceiling and a handwritten text on a side wall. A subtle sound component consists of peacock calls and jungle noises. For 9½ minutes, the video pictures a man and a woman in a primitive kitchen with a breezy yellow curtain to one side. While the man smokes and drinks wine, the woman, who also smokes at one point, sticks a knife in a raw chicken. Because of the couple's repetitive gestures, it is not immediately clear that the video is running backwards—until the wine flows up into the bottle and the juices back into the chicken. The moving image is mesmerizingly slow, warm and tropically gorgeous. (Given the "exotic" setting and Asian features of the actors, issues of identity may come to mind. During the Biennial's panel discussion, Mutu revealed that the video was shot in Connecticut.) In nearly invisible metallic green paint, the cursive text on the wall takes the form of a letter. "Little Mother," it begins, and flows on concisely to make reference to love; Dr. Livingstone, the 19th-century Scottish explorer of Africa; the impact of anesthesia, surgical equipment and modern germ theory on Africa; and ends with a mention of spiced wine. In this context, the upside-down water bottles take on a medicinal reference, recalling intravenous drips.

Allowing for complete immersion in a multifaceted narrative, Mutu's installation felt like a world unto itself and, in some sense, the heart of the show. The brilliance of the exhibition design camouflages the location of *Magic* in one of the far corners of the building. Fire code requirements for two doorways in each gallery along with the lack of hallways and dead ends resulted in interlocked spaces without a specific traffic pattern. Multiple options for moving through the spaces set up unexpected and, according to the curator, unplanned relationships.



View of Wangechi Mutu's installation *Magic*, 2006.



Left to right, Jennifer Bartlett's *Twins*, 2005-06; Thomas Bernhard, 2005; *Purple Corridor*, 2004-05; and Prince Charles, 2004-05; all enamel over silkscreen grid on baked-enamel steel plates.

Cristina Iglesias: *Santa Fe (Celosias I) and Santa Fe (Celosias II)*, 2006, ceramic, dimensions variable.





Above, Stephen Dean's *Grand Prix*, 2006, video; below, his *Target*, 2005, paper dartboards.



Galleries occupied by American performance artist Patty Chang and German provocateur Jonathan Meese, for example, have a common passageway. In their mid-30s, the artists seem to share a nostalgia for the halcyon 1960s and '70s, with Meese adopting the brutish side of hippiedom, along with an affectation of Viennese Actionism, and Chang longing wistfully, naively and a little brattishly for the certitudes of New Age thinking. In her 30-minute video, *Condensation of Birds* (2006), Chang recorded monologues and dialogues with members of the Fellowship of the Heart, which seems to be a New Mexican New Age organization with a softspoken, primarily female membership. Interspersed with their spiritual patter are scenes of an aquarium building filled with tourists and a huge model of a whale suspended from the ceiling, and workmen's construction of a monumental scaffold in the New Mexico high desert. Sometimes, we see Chang struggling with a dark green parachute near the scaffold. A character in the video compares the scaffold to a submarine, and Ottman's revelation that the work refers to a recent submarine accident in which a ship "struck an uncharted undersea mountain 350 miles south of Guam" supplies crucial information for this unhinged narrative.

Like Chang, Meese presented a performance in conjunction with the opening of the biennial. With his mother on stage (ostensibly to protect him from the dangers of his trancelike performance) and contributing to the dialogue, Meese began by painting frantically on placards. His mother also painted a little on the placards and the artist's back. To the sound of recorded rock music, Meese jumped around, climbed a wobbly ladder and scaled the proscenium of Santa Fe's Paolo Soleri Amphitheater. Shirtless, with his long hair flying, he bellowed

about needing his mommy and wanting to be a woman. Frightening in its ineffectiveness, his adolescent interpretation of radical performances by artists such as Hermann Nitsch and Chris Burden suggested that authenticity and risk are unavailable to his generation of young artists.

Meese's performance functioned like a fourth work in his gallery space at SITE. It underscored the performative nature of his painting (in a wildly discordant palette of red, green, black and yellow) and sculpture as well as concerns with autobiography, self-portraiture and urban warrior personae. His three-panel, 18-foot-wide *Dr. Okkult de Large in Fort Knox* (2005-06) is a Rauschenbergian jumble of snapshots, found objects, scrawl-laden sheets of notebook paper, Basquiat-like graffiti and paint squeezed directly out of the tube. Standing guard at either side of the painting are two magnificent bronzes. Life-size with a mossy green patina, *Dr. No* (2006) represents a male figure saluting while sticking his tongue out from a doughy visage shrouded in matted hair. One foot is a giant claw, and phallic tendrils sprout from his back. His pendant, *Suzy Wong* (2006), is terra-cotta red, over life-size, with a face like a cat, a tongue snaking around something phallic—identified

in the gallery notes as an ice cream cone—and genitalia encased in a mandorla. As horrifying as these creatures appear, the plastic modeling of the forms is powerful and sensitive, reminiscent of Rodin. Their backs, recalling *Walking Man* in particular, have been gouged, kneaded and squeezed to impart an expressive vitality to a monstrous Adam and Eve. The artist's first sculpture of a female, *Suzy Wong* is absurdly titled after the Hong Kong prostitute played by Nancy Kwan in the 1960 movie, *The World of Suzie Wong*, despite a carved-in armband bearing the name Isis that reinforces the figure's mythological status. In contrast, the James Bond villain, *Dr. No*, is more literally connoted, although not represented, by the rebellious male statue.

An intriguing structural relationship was established by appending Carsten Nicolai's installation to Jennifer Bartlett's. Nicolai's giant pixelated video projected on a two-sided screen can be read as an updated version, certainly without intention, of Bartlett's long-running pictorial system of colored dots on a grid. Extending the innovations of her monumental, groundbreaking *Rhapsody* (1975-76), which united the language-based format of Conceptual art with the feminist-inspired, joyful forms of Pattern and Decoration, Bartlett's two single panels and four multipanel text paintings derive from recent dreams or other intimacies. On square steel plates, screened with a graph-paperlike grid, glossy dots, reminiscent of those in dot-matrix printing, comprise letters that in turn spell words and form sen-

tences. Queen Elizabeth II, Bartlett's mother-in-law in one of her dreams, is the subject of *Prince Charles* (2005-06) while Elizabeth Murray, with Bartlett, is referred to as one of the proverbial good and evil twins in *Twins* (2005-06). Iconic images, such as Bartlett's well-known silhouettes of a house and a cup and saucer, inspired by a drawing of Murray's, are painted on individual plates dispersed among the panels of text. Legibility is an issue, as it is in Iglesias's and Mutu's work. Given the restrictions of the grid, words often break off to be continued on the next line or plate. Drips or multicolored dots also confound rapid apprehension, enticing the viewer to linger with these beautiful, mysterious paintings.

Audiovisual artist Carsten Nicolai was born in 1965 in Karl-Marx-Stadt (East Germany) and currently resides in Berlin. His technologically inspired work has included digital music (under the pseudonym Alva Noto) as well as video and painting. The three works in the Biennial are housed in a very dark room, lit only by blinking lights emitted by video screens. On a large screen that bisects the room diagonally, *Spray* (2005) consists of large white pixels on a black ground. Beginning with just a few flashing dots that form a horizontal line across the middle of the screen, the pixels proliferate to create an all-over static before breaking up into patterns of acute triangles thrusting diagonally from the bottom to the top of the screen. The patterns derive from a disintegrated computer-generated rendering of a stealth aircraft, scanned from multiple points of view, although this information cannot be gleaned from the purely abstract image on the screen (a more legible version appears on his Web site, [www.alvanoto.com](http://www.alvanoto.com)). A pulsating electronic soundtrack fills the room—and the viewer's body—emanating from speakers beneath a couch-like platform covered with acoustical foam. *Telefunken Anti* (2004), named after the German radio and television manufacturer, includes two flat-screen monitors mounted to face the wall so that their dull light seeps from the sides of the monitors. Tucked into a corner and unlit, *portrait (empty)* of 2006 consists of a rectangular frame with strips of magnetic video tape on which Nicolai's portrait, we're told, is recorded. In contrast to the post-techno bounciness of *spray*, this Duchampian gesture is slight and unprovocative.

Pure sound without visual information is the domain of Thorns Ltd., a Norwegian musical group including Finn Olav Holthe, Jon Wesseltoft and Snorre Ruch, the founder of a Black Metal band named Thorns. Com-

Interior view of Miroslaw Balka's *Bottom*, 2004, video projection, salt.



**In a performance at the opening, German artist Jonathan Meese jumped around, climbed a wobbly ladder and scaled the proscenium of Santa Fe's Paolo Soleri Amphitheater.**

posed for the exhibition, *0.0* (2006) is an audio recording playing on computer hard drives for 185 days, the exact length of the Biennial. Although not close in duration to John Cage's 639-year-long *Organ 2/ASLSP*, currently playing in Halberstadt, Germany, it is doubtful that anyone will ever hear the entire piece and unlikely that any two Biennial visitors will hear exactly the same segment. *0.0* includes "samples/recordings of rooms, objects, instruments, nature/field recordings [and] played instruments." The pitch-dark closet-size gallery at SITE is lined with speakers and includes a few ottomans in the center. Unfortunately I was only able to spend time with the piece twice, but the radical change from one day to the next left me wanting much more. Rapidly building with no distinct sounds except an echoing hum, its roar was ominous one afternoon. The next day's experience was pleasant, practically soothing, with hints of what sounded like a cello or oboe and a violin playing long notes. Incomprehensible human voices could be heard, followed by an abrupt shift to jungle bird sounds. Although electronic music is not known for its emotional effects, *0.0* is a highly moving work of art.

While it is equally contemplative, Stephen Dean's video, *Grand Prix* (2006), is more formal than emotionally engaging. Filmed at demolition derbies in upstate New York, the short video is a painting-in-action, with sliding, crashing, crumpling colors evocative of gestural, painterly works by Hofmann, de Kooning and Chamberlain. Owner-decorated, the cars are spray painted with bright opaque colors—as loud as the roaring audio track—and strewn with textual graffiti. Dean, a French artist who lives in New York and Paris, is admired for the eye-popping intensity of his colors. Earlier works include *Pulse* (2001), a video taken during the pigment-saturated Indian festival of Holi, and sculptural stacks of paperbacks with colorful trimmed ends.

One of the best known artists in "Still Points of the Turning World" is Wolfgang Laib, whose artworks are model forms of consolidated spiritual power. Conducive to prolonged scrutiny, they may have provided a guiding principle for Ottman, who organized Laib's retrospective in 2000. During the opening panel discussion, the curator referred to Laib's gallery as the "stillest point" in the exhibition.

*Ziggurat* (2003) occupies the center of Laib's space, turned at a slight angle to the room's axis. Near the back wall is *Staircases* (2003), a pair of 9½-foot-tall freestanding staircases constructed of wood sheathed in hand-rubbed Burmese Thitsi lacquer. Laib has a long history with Asia, having conducted drinking-water research in India while a medical student in the early '70s. He continues to spend part of each year in southern India. In preparation for his first lacquer works in 2002, he devoted several months to learning the traditional technique

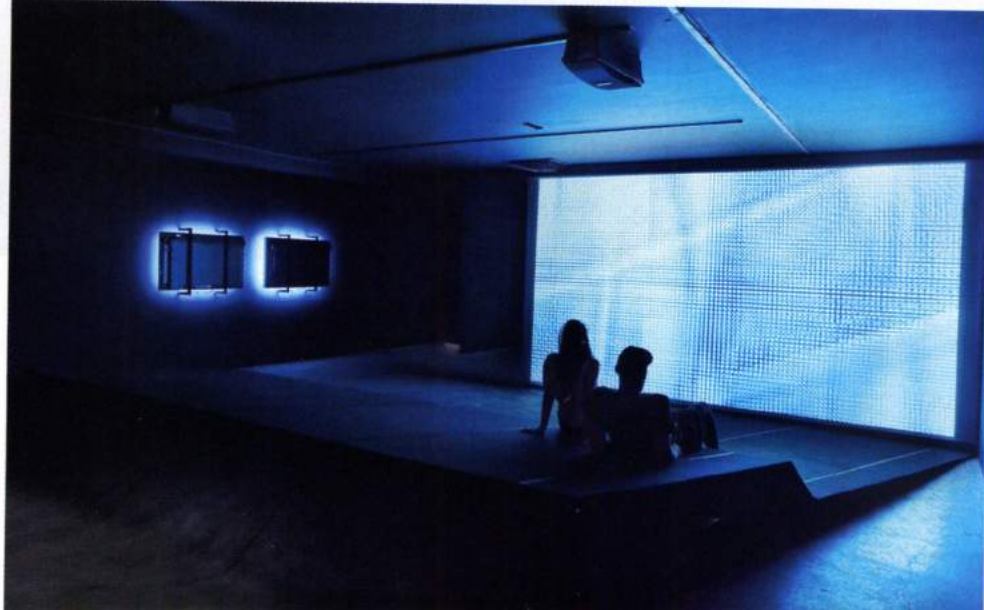


*View of Jonathan Meese's performance Total Revolution = Dr. Eldorado, at the Paolo Soleri Amphitheater, Santa Fe, July 8, 2006.*

*Meese: Dr. No (foreground), 2006; Dr. Okkult de Large in Fort Knox (on wall), 2005-06; and Suzy Wong (background), 2006.*



*Carsten Nicolai: Telefunken Anti (left wall), 2004, two flat screen monitors, 2 CD players; right, Spray, 2005, video projection.*



in Myanmar (Burma). Made from the sap of the Thitsi tree, the black lacquer is enhanced by an uneven layer of cinnabar-tinted lacquer, which produces a waxy and clearly hand-applied surface texture. The rich, almost translucent maroon of *Staircases* recalls wine or blood and, in combination with the form, Aztec sacrifices. *Ziggurat*, a double-sided staircase, is lacquered with an orange over black. The sculptures' narrow treads and risers would be unsuitable for climbing, although they encourage the projection of physical interaction and thus implicate the viewer's body. A feeling of transcendence is enhanced by the silence and stillness of the installation.

Another peripatetic artist, Peter Doig, was born in Scotland, raised in Canada, educated in London and lives in Trinidad. Ottman included six paintings with plenty of space around them in a large gallery. Two of the works have tropical subjects, although Doig works from film stills, found photographs and postcards rather than direct observation. "I tried to avoid painting Trinidad itself," he says in the catalogue, "because I didn't feel I knew enough about it." In oil on canvas, the paintings have a blurry, washed out quality reminiscent of hurried watercolors; thinness and tentativeness often undercut the sense of presence in Doig's work. A small pastoral, *Music of the Future* (2006), is suggestive of Matisse's *Music* and *Joy of Life*, but Matisse's elegant arabesque becomes a ham-fisted smear in the Doig. More articulate is *Pelican (Stag)*, 2003, depicting a man walking in a river beneath a waterfall. The gush of bright blue water falls from behind palm trees, sweeping forward, where it is clearly identified as dripped paint. The drawing is confident and the cool washes of color here have purpose.



Catherine Opie: (left to right) *Petey*, *Oscar*, *Kellen* and *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, all 2004, C-prints.

The most formal of the sanctuarylike spaces in the Biennial, Catherine Opie's gallery includes a perfectly symmetrical arrangement of twenty 20-by-16-inch C-prints on three walls. An "altarpiece," *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004) alone occupies the fourth. The third of Opie's provocative self-portraits, including *Self-Portrait* of 1993 (with the blood-red scar of a child's line drawing literally sliced into the artist's back) and *Self-Portrait/Pervert* of 1994 (with the word "pervert" in Old English script cut into her chest with some sharp instrument), the recent image depicts Opie nursing her big (a little too old for nursing?) blond son. Composed as a traditional Madonna and Child, in front of swagged red damask drapery, the image is anchored by a sturdy pyramid of flesh: flushed, scarred and tattooed woman's corpulence cradling pink and cream innocence. The 20 portraits represent

the "children of fellow artists and gay couples." They are regular children with sullen expressions, looks of concern or, in the teenagers, an air of boredom that results from the directorial nature of adults. Coloristically enhancing sharp details of the children's complexions or clothes, richly hued monochrome backdrops frame each child. The color is dazzling, as emphatic as painting, while the images remain pure, straight photography. Much like the exhibition as a whole, Opie's work offers a luxurious opportunity for intimacy. □

"Still Points of the Turning World," SITE Santa Fe's sixth International Biennial, is on view July 9, 2006-Jan. 7, 2007.

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*Jackson Pollock, CR598, (detail)*