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Maine event

From large installations to smaller works, this biennial packs a punch

By [Sebastian Smee](#)

PORTLAND, Maine - Unusually sprightly and stimulating, the "2009 Portland Museum of Art Biennial" is nevertheless the result of a ruthlessly heavy-handed selection process. Three judges, like a trio of grim reapers, spent two days scything at 3,800 works of art until they were left with just 29.

If that's what it takes, I'm all for it. Exhibitions of this kind are rarely satisfying. Navigating them is like stumbling into the perfumery of a big department store. Clashing aromas give you an instant headache, making meaningful discrimination all but impossible. But something about this biennial, featuring work by artists associated with Maine, felt unified, in spite of its variety, and easy to swallow. It helped that it had a lot of fine work in it.

Two big gestures dominate. The first, a life-size re-creation of a hermit's two-story wooden cabin by Ethan Hayes-Chute, takes up a large part of the museum's Great Hall. Hayes-Chute, an artist in his late 20s, resides in both Berlin, Germany, and Freeport, Maine. Walking into his cabin, made with materials salvaged from dumpsters, construction sites, and recycling centers, puts you briefly on edge, like an innocent bystander unwittingly transformed into a voyeuristic intruder. But the overall impact of the installation is strangely slight.

Aesthetically, the work belongs to a phenomenon in recent art best referred to as "literalism." If the phenomenon had congealed into a movement, its manifesto might contain exhortations along the lines of: "Don't paint me a shark, give me a real one!" (Damien Hirst) or "Don't sculpt your head with clay, make it with your own frozen blood" (Marc Quinn).

The tendency has roots, of course, in Marcel Duchamp's readymades, but it has taken on spectacular new dimensions of late and has produced a lot of big impact art, sometimes with fascinating philosophical implications.

Unfortunately, although Hayes-Chute has the spectacular side of things well in hand, there is something about his reconstruction that fails to take flight. Just as the most interesting atheists have a secretly religious bent (and vice versa), the best literalists tend to harbor a secret love of metaphor, allegory, and symbol. Hayes-Chute's "Hermitage" is missing such hidden dimensions (or if they are there, they're rather too well hidden).

Nonetheless, it has an undeniable allure, sitting there scruffily in the rather clinical context of the museum's entrance, making it a great way to open the show. It's a good foil, too, for the next big gesture we come across - a collapsed structure made of handmade sheet rock, which roils across the gallery floor like a lurching sea, frozen mid-convulsion. Called "Falsework," the piece is by Wade Kavanaugh. It takes up a lot of space and has an ominous undertow, as if Marx's famous characterization of modernity, "All that is solid melts into air," had been replaced by the more hard-headed recognition that all that is solid will most likely turn to rubble.

Most of the rest of the work in the show is more conventional, with a slant toward painting, photography, and landscape. But there is a terrific sculpture called "Thumper" by Sam van Aken, who divides his time between Syracuse, N.Y., and Portland, Maine, and describes himself, endearingly, as "in the business of white whales and windmills, a maker of crude stand-ins and magical devices." "Thumper" is made from 80 subwoofer speakers contained within a 6-foot geosphere, and occasionally, you'll be pleased to hear, it makes a big noise.

One of the best paintings is "Ice Cut (1931)" by Eric Aho, an artist in his 40s who has recently spent a lot of time in the Arctic. It's a spare and painterly work - hints of Courbet's palette-knife technique mixed with Ellsworth Kelly's ambiguities of color and shape. The painting shows a rectangular cut in the ice outside a Finnish sauna, but it was partly inspired by a story of Depression-era ice harvesting in New England told to Aho by his father on his deathbed. Despite its complicated genealogy, it's a real painting, at once tremendously full (of color, of light) and magnificently austere.

I responded strongly, too, to a virtuosic charcoal drawing called "River" by Dozier Bell, which showed a landscape from the air obscured by a dark cloud dividing the view diagonally, with sun irradiating the atmosphere above. The charcoal has been applied to acetate rather than paper; the effect is of textures and atmospheres rather than lines and divisions. It is a dark work, with a real gleam.

"Menace," Sean Foley's wall painting with sculptural components, is ebullient and brash, but seems intent on dominating for the sake of dominance rather than out of any deeper compulsion. If the bright color scheme were less arbitrary, or the forms perhaps a little less carefully controlled, it might have greater impact.

Look out, too, for a magnificent photograph by Tillman Crane called "Bus Stop, Finstown," part of a six-year project documenting the Orkney Island Archipelago, as well as several sumptuous little drawings, employing pencil, watercolor, and collage, by Julianna Swaney, of Portland, Ore.

Swaney, who also embroiders and blogs, confesses to a love for Victorian dresses, furry animals, and beehives. Her drawings here - of, among other things, a man with a swarm of bees for a beard and a girl in a Victorian dress with fur-covered bust and face - make it hard not to share that love. Some kinds of love, I guess, are creepy.

Sebastian Smee can be reached at ssmee@globe.com.