



Gallery

By Alyson B. Stanfield

Define This

What I remember most about my introductory art history classes, besides trying to stay awake in a dark room at 8 a.m., was that the professor and H.W. Janson (author of the tome we used)

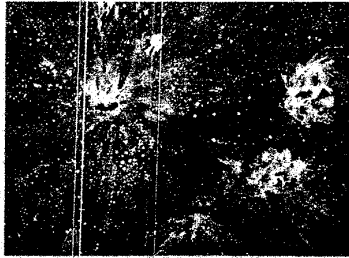
compartmentalized everything so nicely for us. The whole of art history—Western art history, that is—could be reduced to one style after another. From the cave paintings at Lascaux to 20th-century Modernism, which was actually a whole bunch of “isms” of its own. And they seemed to fit so neatly into specific time periods, conveniently occurring one after another. Then ... boom! Post-modernism.

Welcome to “Retrospectacle,” a dizzying tour of the last 25 years or so of contemporary art at the Denver Art Museum. If anything, the show reveals the enormous variety that exists in today’s art world. Styles—if I can even use that word—that aren’t going to be so neatly categorized for future students.

Carl Andre’s 15 aluminum squares, about 16 inches each, are arranged in a zigzag formation on the dark wooden floor next to a white wall. The white lights above are carefully choreographed so that the work doesn’t end with the plates themselves. They spawn an amazing light show on the wall above them: diamond shapes are clear and intense at the bottom of the wall, then refracted in the center. A painting of light produced with the help of all the other elements that we usually take for granted in a gallery installation. A related experience is Dan Flavin’s classic *Untitled (for A.C.)*, a fluorescent light sculpture that adds color to the mix.

Eventually I discovered Lorna Simpson’s *Easy to Remember*, the source of the background noise I had been hearing since entering the galleries. An impressive video installation, it is comprised of separate screens with up-close footage of the lips of fifteen different people humming the tune of the same name. The choice of the tune was not accidental given that each of the participants has a slightly different recollection of the rhythm and pitch. I was hypnotized by the giant lips in constant motion, with some parting slightly at the rests and revealing glimpses of teeth.

Next to Simpson’s work is a sculpture by Fred Wilson, an African American who is representing the United States in this year’s




Vance Kirkland’s *Explosions of Energy Near the Sun Fifty Billion Years B.C.* (1978, oil on linen; 75 x 100 in.) is part of “Retrospectacle” at the Denver Art Museum.

much-anticipated “Venice Biennale.” He has created a name for himself by reinstalling works in museum galleries in a way that forces viewers to rethink the traditional Eurocentric interpretation of art objects.

Wilson’s *Untitled (Atlas)* is a classical male sculpture (in white plaster, no less) that is burdened by the weight of the art history books on his back. They are, of course, books that tell the tale of art from the Western viewpoint. The sculpture stands on a thin volume of African art as if to say it is hidden or rendered meaningless.

Don’t stop at the first floor galleries. Make a trip to the seventh floor to see a photography component for “Retrospectacle.” Yasumasa Morimura’s *Mother (Judith II)* is a modern interpretation of the Biblical story of Judith, who beheads her enemy, Holofernes. His themes are similar to those of Wilson except he seems to comment on the Asian (rather than African-American) place in Western art history through the manipulation of photography. Here, Morimura disguises himself as a cabbage-faced Judith with a Brussels-sprouts necklace and sets up a tableau that puts his victim’s head on a platter surrounded by cold cuts. I’m not so sure I would want to run into his mother on a dark street.

All of the works on view are in the permanent collection of the Museum, which is undertaking a huge new building that will eventually house the contemporary collection. Who knows when you’ll get to see them again? Don’t miss the lipstick urinals by Rachel Lachowicz and a knock-your-socks-off “painting” made of purple ostrich feathers and faux python skin by Denverite Mary Ehrin. 

“Retrospectacle”

Denver Art Museum
100 W. 14th Avenue Parkway, Denver
720-904-8450

www.denverartmuseum.org
Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.,
Wednesday 10 a.m.-9 p.m.,
Sunday 12p.m.-5 p.m.

Through August 3, 2003
\$6 for adults, \$4.50 for students and
seniors; children under 12
and Museum members free