

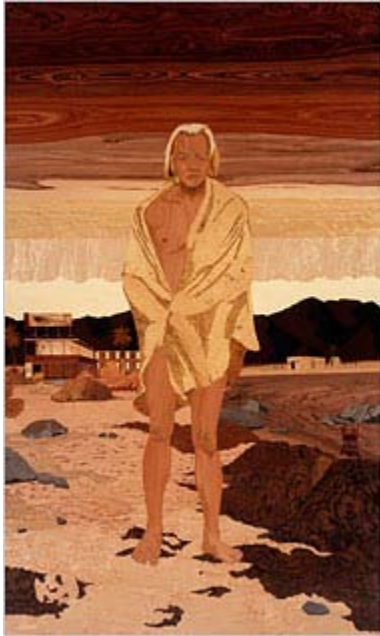
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ART REVIEW | '185TH ANNUAL'

Academy Gives Art Some Wiggle Room

By KAREN ROSENBERG



James Cohan Gallery

185th Annual: An Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary American Art at the National Academy Museum; above, "Bombay Beach" (2008), Alison Elizabeth Taylor's gigantic marquetry image of a beachcomber.

The 2010 [Whitney Biennial](#), which opens next week, is one of the leanest in recent memory. So by its own standards is the National Academy Museum's "185th Annual: An Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary American Art" — down to 65 artists from the usual 120 or so. Reduced finances are to blame, in both cases.

Oddly, this situation is the best thing that could have happened to the Invitational. The standards for this juried exhibition have tightened, and its mission — contemporary art with a visible connection to the traditional studio practice — has a new clarity and intensity.

It helps that some 400 artists, an unprecedented number, submitted work. Quality is high overall. Congestion has been reduced, even though the show occupies fewer

galleries than before. Large swaths of the fourth floor and part of the second are left empty. (This is sad to be sure, but the overstuffed exhibitions of yesteryear didn't do the art any favors.)

A side effect of the show's winnowing is the widening of the gap between the academy's members-only Annuals and its Invitational (nonmember) Annuals, which alternate years. The members' shows have become walled fortresses of figuration and complacent gestural abstraction. The Invitationals look more contemporary, though still dominated by painting. (Since this is the academy and not the Museum of Modern Art, that's not even up for debate.)

The lineup for this year's Invitational looks almost suspiciously young and sexy. It includes the relative newcomers Dana Schutz, Ghada Amer, Chris Martin and Alison Elizabeth Taylor, all of whom have been successful in the market. Petah Coyne, Lari Pittman and [Barkley L. Hendricks](#) have longer résumés but a similarly strong following in Chelsea.

It's great to see them all here, mixing with lesser-known talents like Judith Bernstein, Michael Schall and Anna Lambrini Moisiadis. At times, though, you sense that the selection committee gave some of the bigger names an automatic pass. "Girl With a Dog" (2009) isn't one of Ms. Schutz's better canvases, although its confettilike dots strike a festive tone. And Mr. Hendricks, a celebrated portraitist, is not well served by a small oddity of a landscape.

The academy's shambolic Beaux-Arts building can be hostile to curators, but the extra wiggle room this year has given the organizer Marshall Price a break. He works with the architecture instead of against it, for instance, hanging vibrantly patterned pieces in a room with a zigzagging floor inlay.

Most inspired is the placement of Ms. Taylor's gigantic marquetry work of a beachcomber in a domed, marble-floored alcove on the second floor. Luxury is the glue in this May-December romance.

Even the normally problematic fourth floor, with its low-ceilinged and windowless galleries, looks sharp. Here you'll find small-scale works — drawings, prints, collages and cabinet paintings — with an outsize level of ambition.

Tucked away by the elevator is a large-scale Surrealist object, Stina Köhnke's "Spell" (2007) — a fainting couch upended and draped in tan felt, with dozens of little pouches containing tweezers. Like much else in the show it is formally ingenious and a little wicked.

Nearly everything in the exhibition reveals some trace of the maker's hand, but the academy has embarked on a few tentative forays into more distanced art forms. One of them is Nina Yankowitz's installation "Buried Treasure/Secrets in the Sciences," on the second floor. With digital projections on a laboratory table, it highlights overlooked female scientists: an interesting topic, but the piece looks cold and forbidding in a room of mostly painting.

Nearby, though, is a light-boxed photograph by Cildo Meireles, made in homage to Piero Manzoni, the Arte Povera legend. In it, Mr. Meireles does a headstand on a famous Manzoni plinth in Denmark. The Manzoni, inscribed with "socle du monde" ("base of the world"), proclaims that art is everywhere we look. Mr. Meireles's playful tribute may be the closest the academy has come to engaging the sort of Conceptual shenanigans that go on across the street at the Guggenheim.

The academy hands out prizes for specific types of painting (and some other mediums), as seen by the placards on several works. This may seem conservative, but the winning entries describe a field of remarkable breadth. They include Ms. Schutz's messily exuberant canvas, Richard McLean's photorealist landscape and Elisa Jensen's haunted, Peter Doig-like blend of abstraction and figuration.

Learning to do more with less isn't a bad thing for the academy. For the time being it forces the jury to be choosier and ensures that the art that makes the cut will be shown to best advantage. Ideally some of these lessons will translate to the members' Annuals.

"The 185th Annual: An Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary American Art" continues through June 8 at the National Academy Museum, 1083 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street; (212) 369-4880, nationalacademy.org.