

WINDSOR, ONTARIO

By John Gayer

For the first time in decades, the Art Gallery of Windsor's **WINDSOR BIENNIAL** (May 29—August 22, 2004) became international. Seeking a more accurate representation of the region's artistic activity, the gallery extended the boundaries of its call-to-artists across the Canada/US border, inviting all artists within fifty miles of Windsor and Detroit to submit portfolios. From one hundred and twenty-six submissions, the curatorial committee selected painting, sculpture, photography, video and installation by nine Americans and seven Canadians. Like many recent surveys documenting art practice at a particular time and place, the exhibition confirmed the absence of regional or, for that matter, national tendencies, but for one exception: a concern with issues related to war and terrorism linked the work of several artists from both sides of the border.

A.G. Smith's *Sidewalk Tank* (2000) and *Bomber* (2003) expressed this theme most literally. Built mainly from plywood, the smoky blue bomber and the green and black tank delineate both the terrain and limitations of past wars. The obvious wooden quality of these pieces not only evoked a boyhood fascination with war, but also emphasized that, as an agent of change, war is outmoded.

Similarly, **Peter Williams'** small portrait *Regime Change* (2004) and **Phaedra Robinson's** *Wool over Our Eyes* (2003) conjure the effects of chemical warfare and political rhetoric, respectively. Drawing upon portrait studies by Picasso and Bacon, Williams' distorted face uses lurid pinks and reds to convey the unbearable horror imposed on people with no stake in the conflict. Robinson's expansive work, in contrast, consists of dense, dark and indecipherable layers of text out of which a light, curvy funnel shape emerges, giving the sense that these words add up to nothing more than a lot of hot air. **Tony Mosna's** large, decorative installation makes the last contribution to this theme. *Stuff in the Air* (2004), composed of jagged paper shapes attached to the wall as well as floor-to-ceiling lengths of fishline, represents flying bits of shrapnel as much as particulate matter fouling up the air.



Christopher McNamara, *Intersections* (detail), 2003, three-channel video installation, soundtrack in collaboration with Steve Roy (courtesy the artist).

The rest of the work in the show avoided embracing overtly negative themes. Some of **Megan Parry's** paintings engaged the mind and eye with their captivating presence and subtle humor. Draping eight parallel but irregularly spaced strands of white balls across a blue-black ground, Parry's *Scary Hallucinations* (2003) forced the viewer to question the meaning behind the picture. This seemingly benign abstraction may very well depict a theatrical space and operate as a visual expression of stagefright. The pompom-filled squares in *Trapezoid* (2003) also hint at different things. The canvas' shape suggests perspectival space, but the stacked squares form an irregular grid that firmly holds everything in plane.

Subtle humor also permeates **Michael Bizon's** photo series "My Artist Friends II" (2004). These silver gelatin prints document the artist and five friends wearing the same maskless monkey suit, a goofy get-up with large cup handle ears. The staid expression on the subjects' faces coupled with the suit's ill fit reference: the awkwardness of young artists' lives.

In the short text accompanying the exhibition, the AGW notes a climate of fluctuating identities and the influence of globalization on artists and their work, features embodied in **Christopher McNamara's** intriguing installation *Intersections* (2003). This three channel video projection captures a sliver of day-to-day life at intersections in Barcelona, Detroit and Zurich, showing just how similar the appearance of people, patterns of movement and the structures of spaces can be. In McNamara's take on these places people fade in and out, vehicles pass move in slow motion

and a soundtrack blends music with street noise. Visually supple, this work feels more like a well choreographed dance than cinema verité.

The current version of the biennial marks an important step in its evolution that, coincidentally, leading officials in both cities have echoed. And it is against this backdrop of international exchange and cooperation that thoughts about the biennial's future and the will to iron out glitches evident in the current presentation come into play. The inclusion of an essay, for example, examining the content and context of the work would have given the show more depth. Though some works appeared uninspired, others felt crowded, such as those in the space shared by **Susan Gold, Margaret Laurence** and **Brent Sommerhauser**, thus reducing the work's impact. Criticism may be inappropriate following this institution's demonstration of its continued commitment to local artists, but re-assessing the biennial's form could be profitable. Initiating a project room for a series of solo shows or other types of exhibitions would heighten the focus on artists' work and allow for an even broader range of expression.