

Cornell Council for the Arts Biennial: Inspiring interdisciplinary Discussions with Arts

by Ruixuan Li

This fall, Cornell University hosted the 3rd campus-wide Art Biennial under the theme “Duration: Passage, Persistence, Survival.” The exhibition kicked off in a series of lectures and seminars at the end of September, and will present new works of art before the closing in December. In addition to sponsoring Cornell artists to create works, the Cornell Council for the Arts (CCA) invited many internationally well-known artists, such as American cross-cultural artist Carrie Mae Weems, Chinese artist Xu Bing who is an A.D. White Professor-at-Large, and cross-disciplinary artist Ni'Ja Whitson to together exhibited approximately 20 installations and performance projects.

Professor Timothy Murray, curator and director of CCA, said that his curatorial intention is to let people resonate under today's social environment, discuss across disciplines within a university-wide context, and ultimately transform the campus to a platform for an international biennial. He said: "In the major biennials such as Venice, what I am most interested in is the non-market's interventions outside of the giardinis: they are in crappy sites; they are terribly hung, they tend to be about the work of statements and work of making." Allowed by the university stage, he, as a curator, can bring together artists of all ages and completely different stature to participate in the exhibition without paying any attention to the market conditions, and raise pure dialogues about art. The other thing that the university stage allows for is the very distinct, professionalized, disciplinary discourses. From the perspectives of various professions, the works cover a wide range of topics, such as institutional and ethnic violence, temporality of indigenous culture, transgender phenomena, architectural environment and ecology, and sound transmission, etc. As Murray described it, the exhibition “happened just like a magic.”

Interestingly, there are many overlapping and even complementary aspects in these different perspectives. The Weems' installation *Heave* consists of two temporary exhibition rooms built in the center of the Arts Quad. *Part 1: A Case Study* is a fictitious living room. Every item in the room, including magazines, paintings, videos, computer games, etc., symbolizes the violent thoughts stemmed from personal choice. *Part 2: Heave*, which is completely different from *Part 1*, is a screening room that loops through short films of news clips and self-portraits that are full of elements of domestic violence, political turmoil, racial hatred and killing. If Weems' work is to observe the derivations of racism on social conflicts, such as gender discrimination, from a female perspective, then Whitson's performance *A Meditation on Tongues* is a supplement to the topic from the Queer perspective: In this performance based on Marlon Riggs's 1989 video, people of color and homosexuality act as “disoriented body,” striking the viewers through body language and choreography to cause the mainstream to concern this social issue.

Another complementary dialogue takes place at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art in a corner of the Arts Quad. The Chief Curator and Curator of Asian Art, Ellen Avril, assisted Murray in the curation. She presents Xu Bing's five-channel animation *The Character of Characters*, which was inspired by Zhao Mengfu's hand scroll *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains*, in the special exhibition space, and selected works from the museum's collection to claim the “Calligraphy and painting come from the same origin” opinion mentioned in the animation as well as Chinese people's worship and imitation of classics. The Biennial also borrowed a piece of *Painting Relief* by the Taiwanese minimalist Richard Lin from Cornell alumnus Shin-Yi Yang, and displays it on the first floor of the museum. In this work that was

shown in documenta III, the different materials, thicknesses and gray-tone squares combine the modern concept of “less is more” in the West and the “one creates universe” in Taoism. By presenting works of art from ancient times to the contemporary time, the museum highly summarizes the unique aesthetics of Chinese with its historical evolution.

Throughout the Biennial, the quadrangle landscape with Cornell characteristics has played a similar role as the national pavilions in the international biennials. “They help to frame the works in different claims and discourses. How do you receive a piece on the agriculture quad? It frames the piece! When people walking by see the piece there, they are gonna ask questions about it, and that’s what we want to happen,” says Murray. “We want art to be helping people ask questions.” In addition to the Arts Quad mentioned above, the works are also scattered in Cornell’s different academic areas. For example, landscape artist Hans Baumann and professor Karen Pinkus selected a garnet from the rock garden of the Engineering Quad, which was dug out from four kilometers deep inside the Earth. They set a degradable structure made of local soil around the garnet to make an installation. A circular installation co-created by Cornell Robotic Construction Laboratory and Arnot Teaching and Research Forest is also on display in the Ag Quad. They transformed a discarded tree into a piece of artwork by cutting and assembling. Different academic areas can be seen as different frameworks, providing clues to the audience who come and go to read the arts.

In addition to presenting the exhibition, the Biennial has also made attempts to cultivate the academic atmosphere over the campus. Taking this topic as an example, the “duration” can induce academical discussions in many fields: it can be “short” in its transience, ephemerality, volatility, and perishability. And it can be “long” in its durability, endurance, steadfastness, longevity, and survival. Duration lies at the core of conceptual, architectural, and media art, whether through the experience of the ephemeral media of installation, performance, screen, sound, and time-based art or through the representation of the passage of time via creation, migration, memory, and motion. The idea of duration thus foregrounds the artistic horizons of both temporality and corporeity, indicating the persistence and continued presence of the material world through which the historical and virtual are experienced in their potentiality. Based on this concept, the Biennial, as an entire large piece of artwork, has connected the scholars to not only Cornell community’s past, present, and also the future. In this regard, Xu Bing talked about his opinions after attending several programs. He believes that this small-scale, focused topical biennial represents a development trend in the future and deserves great attentions. If such a tradition can be maintained, the Cornell Biennial will definitely become a very characteristic biennial.