

ART REVIEW

'Biennial I' Launches a Tradition

■ **Photography:** The California Museum of Photography in Riverside opens fall season tonight.

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TIMES ART WRITER

It isn't difficult to round up a bunch of contemporary photographs every two years, put them on public view and call it a biennial. The tough part, if you're a thoughtful curator, is to develop criteria for selecting which of thousands of possibilities to show. Should you establish geographic limitations? Should you try to represent a wide range of techniques and aesthetic approaches or should you narrow the focus and explore one point of view?

Organizers of "Biennial I" at the California Museum of Photography in Riverside—which will open the museum's fall season with a reception from 6:30 to 8:30 tonight—faced all these questions and more. While choosing works for an exhibition, they were launching a tradition for a closely watched museum.

Since it was established in 1973 at UC Riverside, the museum has had a well-regarded but limited exhibition program. With the museum's recent move off campus into its own building on the downtown pedestrian mall came expectations of more vigorous engagement with contemporary photography. "Biennial I" is the first chance for contemporary artists and their audience to check out the climate at the new museum.

As it turns out, the weather is hazy. "Biennial I" is a smart and "politically correct" show, but it feels rather ponderous and dispirited. Any conclusions must be tempered, however, by the fact that

the exhibition was actually organized a couple of years ago by co-curators Edward Earle and Deborah Klochko with former museum director Charles Desmarais, who now directs the Laguna Art Museum. Delays in the building meant that the show was delayed. To their credit, the curators updated many of their original selections to substitute new work, but the catalogue couldn't be changed.

A curatorial statement says that the 19 artists selected are based in California, but "Biennial I" is not a survey of California photography. Instead the show "examines conceptual undercurrents running throughout the medium. What unifies the artists is . . . work that challenges conventional definitions about the nature of photography. With a conservative political climate demanding standardized definitions of art, 'Biennial I' challenges the viewer to expand the meaning of photography," the statement says.

Fair enough, except that the only "politically correct" position seems to be this questioning stance—a stance so thoroughly entrenched that it has formed its own academy with legions of acolytes dutifully nodding and churning out approved work. If any serious criticism can be leveled at the show, it is not that the curators carefully excluded photographs that might simply be perceived as beautiful art or that they purposefully left out street photography.

The problem is beating the drum of a revolution that has long since been fought and won. Even though many people still think photographs should look like Ansel Adams' landscapes, there's a cynical fatigue factor in relentlessly "chal-

lenging the medium" as an end in itself.

Once you get past the ideology and simply look at the art, some of the haze clears up. With a characteristically light touch, Ilene Segalove cuts through artistic pretensions in two "Home Entertainment Center" collages, which take a wry view of the golden age of radio by picturing rapt listeners with electronic boxes that emit a greenish haze.

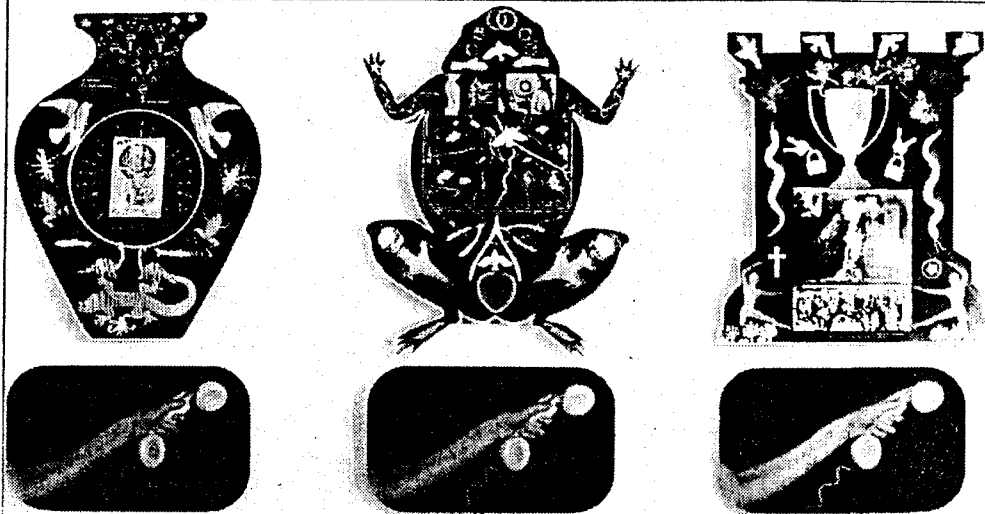
Another conceptualist, Elizabeth R. Bryant, questions accepted meanings of visual language in photographic panels that pair a picture of a hand holding a telephone receiver with silhouettes of objects containing a plethora of images. Meanwhile, Joseph Squier makes ghostly life-size images of nude figures that present intriguing conflicts when you try to figure out what they mean.

Hahn Thi Pham, a Vietnamese artist living in Southern California, uses photographs to unload the burden of physical and mental abuse that has afflicted her people. That may sound like pressing art into public service, but she succeeds through ambiguity. Several photographs of theatrical tableaux, depicting a dreamlike mix of domesticity and violence, are sharply effective. Unfortunately, these strong images get lost in a disjointed installation that includes expressionistic painting.

The show's only traditional social documentation is Richard A. Lou's deliberate "fraud" of posing himself as street people and displaying the pictures with fictitious texts. In light of Cindy Sherman's extensive self-portraiture, this work seems thin, though questioning the "truth" of photographs is very much to the point of the show.

Many other artists address social and political issues, however.

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Conceptualist Elizabeth R. Bryant questions visual-language meanings in this 1988 work.

EXHIBIT: Photography

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"Found Voices," a scaled-down version of Kim Abeles' "Living With AIDS" project, presents taped conversations of people with AIDS in a roomlike setting equipped with a padded listening desk. Lisa Bloomfield takes a more subtle issue—career motivation—and handles it deftly in "self-congratulatory" images of anonymous males coupled with invented success stories. Her satirical approach renders "success" an absurdity, and the trappings that commemorate it just so much fluff.

Ideas are the life of this show, and rarely more so than in David Bunn's witty South America "sighting," which was part of his "Sphere of Influence" exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Locating a crack in the concrete floor that resembles South America, Bunn framed it, made a rubbing of it and set up elaborate ways of viewing it, so that visitors put themselves in the position of in-

trepid explorers in foreign lands. What does this have to do with photography? Not much in a conventional sense, but interpretation of visual data is a central point of the exhibition.

The most ambitious work in "Biennial I" is probably Stephen Axelrad's interactive video installation, "Self-Search." Casting himself as the California Museum of Photography, with an image of his talking mouth on the building, he leads into vignettes about photography, the museum, its collections and his private life. You have the illusion of being able to figure it all out, but no matter how many times you touch flickering images on the screen, you can only see as much as Axelrad has programmed.

California Museum of Photography, 3824 Main St., Riverside. (714) 784-FOTO, to Nov. 4. Public reception for the artists, today, 6:30-8:30 p.m. Regular museum hours: Tues.-Sat., 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sun., noon-5 p.m.