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Minnesota mavericks  
Mary Abbe, Star Tribune  
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At 19-to-1, the odds of getting into the Minnesota Biennial are about twice as tough as the chances of winning a seat in Harvard's freshman class. The daunting statistics didn't discourage the more than 500 Minnesota artists who applied for the Biennial, which runs through Dec. 31 at the Minnesota Museum of American Art in St. Paul.

A mere 26 made the cut.

This year the art is all two-dimensional (paintings, prints, photos and collages), in keeping with the museum's policy of alternating biennials of 2-D and 3-D art (sculpture, installations). The judges, MMAA associate curator Theresa Downing and Elizabeth Dunbar, curator at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, picked the work after viewing 1,500 unidentified slides.

"The things that tended to catch our eye were fresh and creative, whether they were in traditional or new media," said Downing.

Like its more famous cousins, the Whitney Biennale in New York and Italy's Venice Biennale, the home-grown event is strong on young talent, maverick vision and relatively fresh faces.

A potent political undercurrent runs through some of the strongest items.

St. Paul artist Patricia Olson successfully highlights the domestic cost of war in "Operation Mopping Up," an installation of 10 sheets of paper smeared with blood-red stain and pinned to a clothesline stretched along a crimson wall. Seven pages bear the names of hundreds of dead, mostly civilians, killed in the U.S. war in Iraq; three pages carry news about the war overlaid with images of a young woman mopping the floor. Although obvious, the metaphor effectively articulates the endless, dreary toil that will be needed to heal, cleanse and restore the brutalized country.

In his staged photo "Bomb Reform," Sean Smuda of Minneapolis illustrates the quandary of an individual -- posed with finger on a bomb trigger -- torn between the military braggadocio and peacenik hectoring represented by other costumed characters.

Two clever drawings by John F. Diebel of Minneapolis subtly entwine history and politics into curious European-comic-book vignettes. Diebel garnishes architectural drawings with figures cut from magazines, their faces modified with mole-like features. In "Bahnhof (Station)," he overlays an ink drawing of a European train station with costumed couples spanning the past century, from Edwardian-era luxe through Nazi uniforms to contemporary tourist sportswear. In the ominous "Ministerium (Ministry)," crowds of spies and apparatchiks surround a monstrous black building. Enigmatic and unsettling, Diebel's work also is refreshingly original.

Mike Elko of Edina injects a welcome humorous note with "Herr Hasenfuss," a silkscreen print advertising a "faith-based" national-security system employing color-coded rabbit's feet, and "Art Talent Matchbook," a hilarious parody of matchbook-cover art talent contests.

Two large paintings by Matthew Bindert of Minneapolis are noteworthy for their innovative merger of huge woodcuts with layers of paint, and for their subtle fusion of Asian and Western architecture and design, including a cityscape featuring a Midwestern barn and Japanese houses mashed between skyscrapers.

As if inspired by Twin Cities hot-shot photographer Alec Soth, who is not in the show, many young photographers have taken to aestheticizing the banal and spotlighting incongruous or freaky aspects of American life. Color photography, a strong suit, ranges from Chuck Avery's minimalist study of gravel to Alison Hoekstra's rail-yard landscapes and Erika Ritzel's elegant, Soth-style pictures of a drab living room and shopping carts. Birdwatcher Paula McCartney turns landscapes into stage sets by adding exotic, artificial birds while her husband, Lex Thompson, contrasts the idealized landscape of a museum's deer-diorama with an actual ravaged forest. Thompson's photo of a living room crammed with taxidermied deer, fish and bighorn sheep is both hilarious and depressing.

Among the unexpected delights are Mickey Smith's photos, which evoke personality and pathos from the spines of shelved books, thanks to her sharp eye and bold lighting.

And among the novelties are three ornamental paintings by Andy Messerschmidt of Ely, Minn., who gets trippy effects by collaging doilies, bits of lace and garishly patterned fabric (paisley, hippie flowers) to heavily painted surfaces. Symmetrical and gaudy, his designs have a psychedelic naivete rare to museum galleries. Like his British counterpart Chris Ofili (who famously used elephant dung on his canvases), Messerschmidt seems to be a free-wheeling original caught in a cultural time warp.

Other participants are: Roberta Allen, Scott Baumgartner, Larry Bemm, Susannah Bielak, Carol Lee Chase, Lewis Colburn, Gregory Euclide, Clea Felien, Alexa Horochowski, Jacob Lunderby, Jeanne McGee, Melanie Pankau, Jesse Petersen and Chris Smiar.

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What: Paintings, photos, prints and collages by 26 Minnesota artists chosen from more than 500 applicants.

When: Ends Dec. 31.

Where: Minnesota Museum of American Art, 50 W. Kellogg Blvd. St. Paul.

Review: Fresh faces, quirky views and sound art training animate images that range from political musings to decorative abstractions.

Tickets: Free. 651-266-1030 or [www.mmaa.org](http://www.mmaa.org).

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