

# sculpture

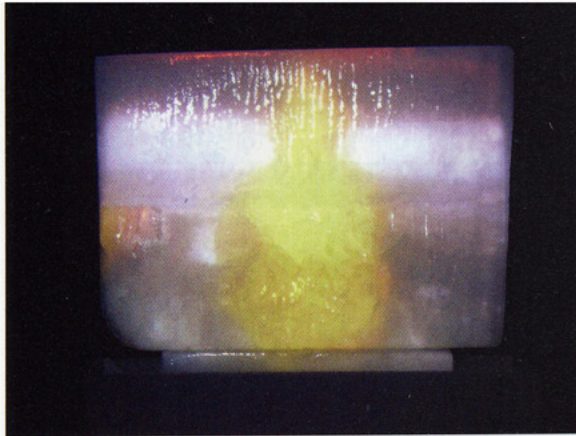
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## CUENCA, ECUADOR Cuenca Bienal

The Ninth Bienal de Cuenca was held 2,200 meters up in the Ecuadorian Andes where the air is clear, sort of. One of the cultural highlights of the region, the Bienal, founded in 1987, is international in scope, which means Central and South America, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and the United States. Forty-nine artists officially participated in the prize competition (three prizes at \$20,000 each), while the show featured 79 artists altogether, including a few from Europe and Asia under the umbrella of parallel events. Almost all of the works, located in more than 13 venues throughout the city, were integrated into the curatorial program of "Espacios, Tiempos, Identitarios," the theme established by Diego Jaramillo Paredes, an architect, artist, and professor at the University of Cuenca. Artists were asked to interpolate Cuenca's history (this is the 450th anniversary of its Spanish, though not its Incan, founding) with that of other cities, eliding the global into the local in constructs that relied on the imaginative. This edition was unobjectionable—there were good works in various media and most were refreshingly low-tech—although the organization could use some tweaking.

Totorococha, a newly renovated industrial site at the far edge of Cuenca, was the most exciting venue. It housed 16 artists, including two prize winners: Mateo López from Bogotá, with *Narración de los Encuentros Casuales* (2005–06), a sprawling, miniaturized, re-imagined vision of Bogotá constructed out of handmade replicas of found objects, and Esteban Piedra from Costa Rica, with *La Construcción*, which played with the concept of the body as habitat and cycles of construction and destruction. caraballo-farman (Leonar Caraballo and Abou



Above: caraballo-farman, *Contours of Staying*, 2004–07. Video projections on ice block and wood, ice block 30 in. high. Below: Fran Siegel, *Redistribution*, 2007. Mirrored Mylar, Duralar, graphite, mica, dichromatic mirrored glass, reflecting pool, monofilament, plate glass, and aluminum strips, 20 x 10 x 9 ft. Both works shown at the Cuenca Bienal.

Farman), a collaborative from New York, contributed one of the single most gorgeous works in the show, a video of the Falun Gong protesting outside the Manhattan Chinese Consulate in a snowstorm. The images were projected onto a flat, screen-like, shimmering block of slowly melting ice, with two viewing sides—one showing the narrative, the other showing luminous blurs of color like an abstract painting in motion.

La Limpia, a collective from Ecuador, received an honorable mention for a walk-in gallery turned into a three-dimensional drawing that consisted of swirls of black rubber gas hoses attached to a sleek, clean gas pump. Metaphor, anyone? Colombian photographer Gloria Bulla presented another arresting project at Totorococha, a three-tiered, two-wall assembly of Bogotá women, posed similarly to Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*,



each representing a personal narrative of displacement.

Juan Pablo Ordóñez, from Cuenca, was also a prize winner. His colored Mylar inserts in the upper windows of the houses opposite the Museo de Conceptas splashed light across its whitewashed façade, weather conditions permitting, in a phenomenological, ever-changing painting. (This was the first time that Cuenca did not give a traditional painting prize, construing the definition of painting in much broader, more contemporary terms.)

Urban spaces as a theme is a biennial favorite, and while some contributors barely touched on it, Marcelo Aquirre, another Cuenca artist, placed his large, socio-politically driven, boldly conceived, Kippenbergian paintings outside. Two other public projects ran into difficulties. A mural by the Argentine artist Mariano Molina was unceremoniously painted over when it turned out that he had mistakenly been given a national heritage wall for a site. And the billboard-sized photograph of Ecuadorian artist Santiago Reyes and his male lover in bed, included in a parallel exhibition, was taken down.

Fran Siegel, a southern California-based artist, was the official representative of the U.S., selected by the State Department, but her work was designated a parallel event. She created three magical, site-specific installations using small cut-out pieces of reflective Mylar suspended on monofilament to create gossamer, sparkling webs, two in the Catedral Vieja and one in a small public park. Each enhanced its inconspicuous, overlooked space (Siegel's trademark strategy). The spatial drawings, premised on light and shadow, the transient and the experiential, as well as the history of the site, reinforced the Bienal's general schema of emphasizing contemporary idioms but not the newest, most costly technologies.

The Casa de los Arcos, an abandoned house near the western edge of Cuenca renovated for the Bienal, hosted another parallel exhibition. Works by four artists were featured there, including a delightful, multimedia collaboration between two German artists, Ilka Helmig and Andreas Reichel, that documented the process of woolgathering from shearing the sheep to making the wool into yarn and knitting it. The sheep was then dressed in the resultant pink sweater—in which it attended the opening. There was also a showing of Cuenca artists that featured, among other works, a smart video by the young Blasco Moscoso, which shows him pulping dictionary definitions of painting; he runs the single sheets of paper through a blender, using the mash to make a monochromatic painting which was also hung in the show.

While Cuenca was certainly not Venice or São Paulo, it had a geniality and inventiveness of resolutions sometimes lost in the freneticism and increasing commercialization of the great biennials. At Cuenca, as in other peripheral biennials, there remains an immediacy and candor that underlines art as an experiment, not a financial investment, and the old, sky-high city was itself an added attraction.

— Lilly Wei