

Budgetless political art show rich with ideas

Jan 25, 2009

"Bailout Biennial," Golden Belt, through March 15.

Bailout has been front page news for months -- \$700 billion needed to avert economic disaster; the banks, the automobile industry, Fannie Mae are all too big to fail. The word "bailout," has also won this year's dictionary award for the year's top buzzword. That is the grist for the artistic mill that has churned up a sharply political show at the gorgeous space in the newly renovated Golden Belt building in downtown Durham.

Elin O'Hara Slavick, co-curator with Jeff Waites of the "Bailout Biennial," told me the idea of the show was born last October when she was talking about the space at Golden Belt with Nancy Kitterman of Scientific Properties, which owns the property.

"There was no budget," she said, "but I thought I would try, so I sent out an e-mail to artists I knew and said this is a budgetless show; you have to pay for shipping your work, but if you want to participate, send images by Dec. 1." She called it a Biennial to make fun of the huge money spent on biennials that appear all over the world. She said 26 artists responded and she was so impressed with the work and their serious desire to participate that they were all invited to be a part of the exhibition.

The exhibit includes more than 50 objects and each one looms large in the vast space of the unfinished room. There is a checklist that visitors must use, because there are no wall tags. As you enter, a huge wood reproduction of a \$1 bill confronts you; a big hole replaces President Washington's picture, and those who want can put their head through the hole and have their picture made. "Federales Reservados," the title, is written in Spanish except for the words on the left which read, "Obtaining the note tends to label human beings as illegal in public." On the back wall are Severn Eaton's currency portraits of Ben Franklin, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, done in blood, and if you stand back, Washington's image fills the hole in the large wood reproduction.

Moving around the room, the cynicism and biting humor fill the air and needle the spectator into studying the images and reflecting on the messages.

In one nook that Slavick calls her Big Corner is Andrew Johnson's "Futures," a huge image of a pig. Johnson used eight hollow core doors for his giant pig speaking to congressional pork embedded in its many spending bills. On a nearby wall are Joshua Bienko's prints that focus on the "too big to fail" idea.

"Too Big to Fail (AIG)" features a sleeveless worker with bulging biceps and in "Too Big to Fail (GM)" a scantily dressed model drips enormous breasts.

Cathryn Griffin's Ink Jet prints, featuring empty or abandoned developments in Ocean Isle, Brunswick County and Cashiers, N.C., as of June 2008, are too close for comfort; similar scenes are right here in the Triangle.

Johnson, who drove overnight from Pittsburgh to bring his art, has a number of objects in the show, all within the theme but in a variety of different mediums. Hanging from the ceiling are two bags filled with shredded bits. Johnson titled them "White Trash." The bags are filled with white-collar office refuse.

Hiroshi Sunairi, a Japanese artist living in New York, offers three large crumpled pieces of white paper stamped with the word "Maverick." Slavick told me he was one of her students and these wrinkled signs refer to McCain's slogan and how it and his campaign crumbled before our eyes.

Based on news media information Becca Albee simulates the AIG Invoice Summary of a trip the corporate officers made just after they received their first installment of the bailout money. They went to the St. Regis resort in California for a half-million dollar retreat.

To my mind the piece that said it best is Julie Thomson's "How Much am I paying? Free, Please Take One. You've Paid Enough Already." Thomson's assemblage includes a voting booth (the kind where you stand and fill out your ballot by hand), covered with give-away buttons emblazoned with \$2,296.84, the figure it will cost each United States citizen to pay for the \$7 billion bailout.

Slavick is a member of the art faculty at UNC Chapel Hill and at least half of the artists in the show are teaching at the university level. She agreed that working in academia as an artist is totally liberating; if you are tenured you can make art that is highly critical of the establishment and you will not lose your job.

We are not used to having political art in our area. Not all of this is top art and not every idea is palatable, but it is an important show because it forces us, the viewers, to think.

Blue Greenberg's column appears each week in The Arts. She can be reached at blueg@bellsouth.net or by writing her at c/o The Herald-Sun, P.O. Box 2092, Durham, NC 27702.