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"Fine Line" spans an intriguing horizon

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Posted: 12/05/2008 12:30:00 AM MST
 Updated: 12/11/2008 08:51:17 AM MST

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"Fine Line," running through Feb. 15 at the Museo de las Américas, offers new takes on the venerable medium of drawing. Visible in the foreground are pieces from Argentinian artist Mauro Ariel Kolliva's series, "Ropa para Monstruos (Monsters Clothes)." (Brian Brainerd, The Denver Post)

Given the hundreds of art exhibitions that take place each year in Denver, finding a fresh tack is no easy task.

But Patty Ortiz, the always-enterprising executive director and curator of the Museo de las Americas, has managed to do just that in "Fine Line," an exhibition continuing through Feb. 15.

In the main gallery, she placed a horizontal line along the walls 5 feet off the floor and asked four of the five participating artists to create site-specific installations that respond to it — a simple but provocative idea.

Given humankind's integral relationship with the earth and sky, it is nearly impossible not to perceive the line as a kind of horizon, and two of the artists relate to it directly in such a way.

The most overt connection can be seen in New York artist Lucas Monaco's "Flicker," in which he keys on the line as the horizontal focal point for a series of his skewed, compressed perspective drawings of imaginary urban landscapes.

Several smaller examples of his kind of satellite views of cities are on view elsewhere, including "Landscape Impressions No. 1" (2005), an ink and acrylic drawing on canvas, with subtle washes of color.

In his wall installation, Mexico City artist Maximo Gonzalez also uses the line as a horizon, but his work has a more ethereal, abstract quality.

Incorporating 10,000 dots punched from Mexican peso notes (it requires close examination to make out what they are), he carefully pins them to the wall in a gently undulating pattern that loosely suggests a giant topographic map.

The point of these installations, and, indeed, the entire exhibition, is to explore the ever-changing contemporary dimensions of drawing, using the work of five Latino artists as guides.

Drawing has reasserted itself in the art world, as such seemingly old-fashioned notions of craft and technique take on renewed importance. But if today's drawings take cues from the past, they are firmly rooted in the present, where conceptual underpinnings are a must.

While most of the pieces hew to traditional formats, others lift drawing off the paper and take it in unexpected directions and forms. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Gonzalez's witty installation, "School of Rats" (2008).

In this narrative piece (unrelated to the horizon installations), lines come to life in a short cartoonlike video and then bounce from the screen and onto the wall, transforming into the three-dimensional form of dozens of felt rats.

If the underlying concepts behind "Fine Line" are compelling, the resulting show comes off as a bit flat. It's hard to pin down the exact reasons.

Certainly a few of the pieces are just plain yawners, such as Mexico City artist Ricardo Rendon's installation, "Trabajo Mural/Action Field," which is more of an inaction field. It consists of nothing more than a series of circles composed of drywall screws.

The overintellectualization and, in some cases, faux-intellectualization, doesn't help either. A good example are Rendon's uncomplicated, archetypal drawings burnt into wood panels, such as "Espacio de Proteccion 2" (2008), which depicts flowers grown from each end of a block.

According to the accompanying text panels, these pieces are supposed to deal with the destruction of nature and the ominous implications of modern building practices. Or something. Isn't it OK to just enjoy them for their aesthetic value?

The exhibition could use an injection of emotion. Helping in that department is the humor provided by "School of Rats," as well as Argentine artist Mauro Ariel Koliva's lighthearted series, "Ropa para Monstruos (Monsters' Clothes)."

These impeccably rendered ink drawings provide the entertaining prospect of imagining what the monsters who wear these fantastical garments might look like.

"Fine Line" falls short of a knockout, but it starts with an intriguing idea and offers new takes on an old medium.

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Among four site-specific installations on view is Argentinian artist Mauro Ariel Koliva's "Bajo la Linea (Below the Line)." (Brian Brainerd, The Denver Post)

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