



## **Visual arts review: “Art of the State” at The Arvada Center galleries presents 191 works by 160 Colorado artists**

By Ray Mark Rinaldi, January 30, 2013

Before we get to the “Art of the State,” let’s take a minute to consider the “state of the art exhibit” itself, which in Arvada, is strong.

The Arvada Center galleries, mighty in size at 10,000 square feet and aggressive in programming, has established itself as the premier showcase for contemporary art in Colorado over the past few years, stealing that mantle from the less-focused exhibition spaces in the big city next door.

Its weapon: an inclusiveness that stretches across Colorado’s 64 counties and ignores the established hierarchy of who gets to show their work in this state. Arvada lets everybody in, newcomers, veterans and the overlooked. Last year’s “Women of Influence,” for example, featured all three.

Those years of prep work positioned the gallery well for “Art of the State,” which takes the idea about as far as it can go. Arvada issued an open call for artists to submit work — anybody, any medium — and the response was overwhelming. More than 1,600 images poured in from 588 artists.

Arvada’s Collin Parson, along with guest curator Dean Sobel from the Clyfford Still Museum, pored over, wrestled with and reduced the offerings to 191 works, on display in all three of the center’s galleries through March 31.

“Art of the State” is a massive, rambling show, and it comes together nicely. The exhibit is a challenge to take in, 10 times the size of many shows. But it does capture the nature of work in Colorado these days, which is to say much of it is good and some of it is great.

There’s a terrific diversity in the rooms, stretching from a recent piece by 80-something Bernice Strawn to up-and-comers like Zach Reini, who graduated from the Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design just last year.

Both have a point of view. Strawn has put together a large, flat construction made primarily from aged, salvaged wood. Impressive beyond the fact that it had to be a physically demanding piece to make, it wears its oldness proudly.

Reini comes at things from a trendier place. For “Robin Hood,” he brought his bow to the gallery and shot three arrows into a frame; wherever they landed, that was the piece. It’s fresh and fun and just the sort of expression that has become the norm for younger artists in this conceptual age.

Variety keeps this exhibit going. Jewelry, prints, textiles, big, bronze sculptures, they’re all here. There are lovely, little watercolors and serious moments of abstraction. One of those moments, Andrew Roberts-Gray’s “Abstraction #40,” a striking landscape cut across and up with an abrupt swath of red, is one of the show’s best works.

“Art of the State” has worthy examples from a few local legends. Phil Bender and Tony Ortega have pieces. So do frequent showers Theresa Anderson, Margaret Kasahara, Mai Wyn Schantz and Lauri Lynnxe Murphy. These artists do much to give the show credibility.



But the exhibit also gives space to lesser-known names, some you've never heard of, others whose work you see around town but who rarely get the attention they deserve. Among the pleasant surprises to check out: Joseph Coniff's oddly tall "School Chair"; Emil Brady's "Expulsion" mobile; Kevin Kissell's animation-inspired needlepoints; Chris DeKnikker's lumpy, lumber painting "Rounding Corners."

If this sounds like a lot of art, it is - probably too much. Its clear sentimentality is at work in some of the choices. It must be hard to reject veterans from an array like this, too tempting to want to represent all genres and far-flung regions. A viewer might wish it was smaller by a third, though part of the charm here is a prevailing democratic aura. It's a tough call.

And in a sense, it could use a little more. For a Colorado show, "Art of the State" lacks the regional feel you might expect from a mountain state. There's not so much that updates Western art for the current age. There are red rocks and natural vistas in the mix, but a disappointing lack of geographic specificity. Walter Barton's whimsical "Ursa Arctos," a folk-art bear made from wood and bark, is one of the exceptions that stand out.

What it does offer is a touching, insider quality that is both comfortable and revealing for viewers from Colorado. Kendrick Howard photographs the "16th Street Mall," but from an alley. His black-and-white shot of bricks and fire escapes reminds us of the Denver we know but tourists don't see. There's a similar urban intimacy in Robert Gratiot's realistic painting of the revolving doors at the skyscraper known as "1999 Broadway." He brings warmth and familiarity to the building's dominant glass and steel.

Little moments like that make "Art of the State" an important effort. The curators deserve a hand for taking it on, and so does the Arvada Center for making a statement about who it is and who we are here. The idea of regionalism is important in a world where every city is starting to look the same. We've got to consider it, honor it, and this show does.

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**"ART OF THE STATE."** The Arvada Center galleries present 191 works by 160 artists from across Colorado. Through March 31. 6901 Wadsworth Blvd., Arvada. Free. 720-898-7200 or [arvadacenter.org](http://arvadacenter.org)