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The \$150,000 Question

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Photo by Ryan Brandenburg/Temple University

Finalist Ryan Trecartin at the opening of the Wolgin competition exhibition.

PHILADELPHIA—In the mid-1970s, banker, real estate maven, philanthropist, and Philadelphia native Jack Wolgin installed Claes Oldenburg's specially commissioned (and now iconic) giant *Clothespin in Center City* along with Jean Dubuffet's *Milord la Chamarre*, a 24-foot depiction of a man in fancy costume in the artist's characteristic *l'art brut* style. The additions to Philadelphia's cultural landscape raised the city's profile internationally. But as monumental as those works are, Wolgin, now 92, may make a bigger impression with his latest initiative, the Jack Wolgin International Competition in the Fine Arts.

When Temple University's Tyler School of Arts made its move last year from its suburban campus into North Philadelphia, Wolgin saw an opportunity to again bring great art and a good deal of attention to his hometown. Administered through Tyler, the \$150,000 award is the largest juried prize in the world to go to an individual visual artist. To be awarded annually, it is intended for an artist who has not yet received widespread recognition outside of the art world and whose work breaks new ground by crossing traditional boundaries.

"There was a great deal of discussion about the term 'emerging artist,' " says Ingrid Schaffner, referring to one of the competition's criteria. Senior curator at Philadelphia's Institute for Contemporary Art, Schaffner was one of three jurors who selected the three finalists and determined the prize winner — to be announced Oct. 22 — from a larger pool of nominees, the exact number of which has not been released. "Many artists we admired were not selected because they were so far advanced in their careers," she says.

After Schaffner and fellow jurists Paolo Colombo, adviser to the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art, and Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society in New York, had defined their terms, she says, "we surprised everyone by coming to a consensus fairly quickly." In the end, the three finalists — Ryan Trecartin, Sanford Biggers, and Michael Rakowitz — are perhaps not as emerging as one might have imagined, ranging from their late 20s (Trecartin) to 40ish (Rakowitz), and all having exhibited widely. But based on the work on view at the inaugural competition on view at the Temple Gallery through Oct. 31, it's not difficult to see how they ended up there.

Each artist is represented by an installation of works incorporating sound and sight in a way that demands interpretation on its own terms. To enter any one of the three mini-shows requires a significant perspective shift, and, complicating matters, each occupies a space not completely sequestered from the others but instead situated in what amounts to a long hall broken by floating walls, so the viewer must walk through the first two installations to reach the third.

Sounds bleed between the spaces, though it's perhaps not as disruptive here as elsewhere. Moving from section to section, viewers experience a good amount of dissonance — and not just auditory. These are three artists with vastly different agendas. Biggers, whose work is encountered first, spoke to ARTINFO about his contribution at the exhibition's opening, noting that he doesn't "over-author it — confusion is part of the experience." It is, a bit, and that sense of confusion seems to be a thread running through the work of all three artists here — in a good way. There is a palpable sense of each person trying to communicate an experience that's far too complicated to be explained in a straightforward manner.

The centerpiece of Biggers's installation is *Bittersweet the Fruit*, a life-size replica of a willow tree with a small video monitor placed inside the trunk, showing the New York-based artist (who is also a musician) playing a piano in what appears to be a rain forest, riffing off "Strange Fruit," the song about a lynching made famous by Billie Holiday. Headphones for the viewer to put on hang on two ropes knotted like nooses, one red, one black, and dangle and sway from the limbs of the tree when not in use. The piece was inspired in large part by the racially motivated killing of James Byrd, who was chained to the back of a pickup truck and dragged to death in Texas in 1998.

Ghosts seem to be present. On two other monitors ("The large one the superego; the smaller one, on the ground, the id," Biggers said) is the piece *Shuffle*, which shows a boy applying clown makeup on a commuter train, and finds a man — maybe the boy's father, or the man the boy might become — applying similar makeup before venturing into the woods, where he ends up tied to a tree beneath an enormous, red-lipped grin hanging from the branches above him, with flashing LED bulbs as teeth. One side of this same mouth, *Cheshire*, which is about two feet high, is placed on the ground in the gallery so that the missing half can be seen in reflection on the floor.

From Biggers one moves to Rakowitz, best known for his project ParaSITE in Boston, New York, and Baltimore, for which he built (and still builds) inflatable shelters for the homeless that utilize warm air from buildings' exhaust vents. His work here, *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007/2009), is a version of an installation that was shown at Lombard-Freid Projects in 2007, an ode of sorts to the objects that were lost or stolen in the looting of Iraq's National Museum in 2003. Using Arabic food wrappings and English-Arabic newspapers, the artist re-created a representative group of the statues, steles, and portions of the ancient objects that are being recovered by agencies from around the world. Asked why he chose to reprise the piece here, Rakowitz says, "It's still an issue, it's still important. It's still happening."

A recording of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" is looped in the room, which pushes one's brain around in even more directions: The version is a cover by Ayyoub, a group based in New York that fuses Arabic folk music with multiple genres. Donny George, the director of the Iraq museum at the time of the looting, was also a drummer in a band called 99% that covered Deep Purple songs. The original song is about a fire that overtook a theater during a Frank Zappa concert in Montreux, Switzerland, in 1971; the members of Deep Purple had watched the building burn from across Lake Geneva. One can learn all of this from an annotated time line of selected events in Iraq between 800 B.C. and the present, which is printed across one wall of Rakowitz's space. Meanwhile, the song takes on a multiplicity of new meanings; among other things, media images of smoke and fire over Baghdad during the initial U.S. invasion leap to mind.

The final room belongs to the Texas-born, Philadelphia-based Trecartin, who is debuting a new video, *P.opular S.ky (section ish)*. As with his other films, the focus here is on the vicissitudes of

its young characters and the fragmented world they inhabit, which is gloriously introverted and broken, and somehow made enormous by the furious pacing of the editing and the stripped-down, vivid emotions he coaxes from his actors.

Present in the physical room are elements seen in this work and its precursors, including *A Family Finds Entertainment*, shown at the 2006 Whitney Biennale: smashed glass and mirrors, cheap plastic chairs in a sandbox along with a prosthetic calf and foot, a metal picnic table enclosed by metal fencing (with a gate, so one can sit at the table and watch the video on the screen through chain links) in the center of the space, and a trio of airplane seats that have been set against a side wall. Asked about the choice of plane seats, Trecartin responded that it was about “using something you don’t have control over to get somewhere you want to go.” The antiseptic lines of damaged IKEA furniture and the anonymous airport-style carpet attempt to smooth things over in a deceptive calm.

In the video, character arcs and any plotting are layered far beneath what is easily discerned, while pent-up emotions are readily released, exploding in phrases casually tossed off like petty litter in the street. “Motherfuckers, where’s my betrayal?” one of the main characters complains. Another: “I am totally against destination as a concept.” Another: “I think I’m gonna beat someone with a bat.” And another, nearly seriously: “I wanna live in a world where narration is the devil.” It may sound like the melodramatic speech of youth, and that could be part of the point; everything is cast aside in favor of the overriding emotion of the moment. The characters, who could be male, female, or some conglomeration, only seem to care about making an impression on whoever is in the room, getting across what is wanted and needed and felt — however untrue or true it may be. Trecartin says he is always thinking about transition, how one thing fades into the next, even his own work. “I’m not concerned with making something timeless,” he said. “I’m concerned about the future and the present.”