

'ART: 21' LETS ARTISTS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

by Christine Temin,
Globe Staff

Whom would you pick if you had to make a list of 21 contemporary American artists who are shaping 21st-century art? That was the challenge facing the producers of "Art: 21 - Art in the Twenty-First Century," a four-hour PBS series airing on WGBX-TV (Channel 44) Saturday and Sept. 29, from 9 to 11 p.m. Some of the anointed - Richard Serra, Bruce Nauman, Maya Lin, Louise Bourgeois - are long past needing the 15 minutes of fame the show allots to each artist. Others - San Francisco graffiti and mural artists Barry McGee and Margaret Kilgallen; Pakistan-born Shahzia Sikander, painter of meticulous miniatures in the style of traditional Indian and Persian art - are less celebrated. The producers of the series, Susan Sollins and Susan Dowling, have included artists young, old, male, female, of various races and national backgrounds. They're not merely being PC; they're reflecting the reality of an art scene whose diversity still isn't necessarily reflected by major galleries and museums.

Sollins and Dowling, who came up with the series idea and raised \$2.7 million to fund it, make no judgment other than by exclusion: You won't find realist painting, figurative sculpture, "Outsider" art or craft here. You also won't find any jargon-spouting experts. The producers let the artists speak for themselves for the most part. And for those who crave theory, there's plenty on the Web site pbs.org/art21. Assuming, probably correctly, that even a Serra or a Lin isn't an automatic draw for a mass TV audience, Sollins and Dowling brought celebs on board to participate in zingy videos that introduce the four programs. High-profile multimedia artist Laurie Anderson boards a giant white armchair to whiz through urban and rural landscapes to open the section on "Place"; she also confesses to a desire to live in a billboard high above overcrowded Manhattan. "Law & Order" star S. Epatha Merkerson is quilting at the beginning of the "Spirituality" show. Steve Martin, actor and art collector, teams up with an artist of similarly silly sensibility, William Wegman, for "Identity," and tennis commentator and gallerist John McEnroe pairs with video artist Barbara Kruger on the "Consumption" segment.

Recycling the notion that people can be made more comfortable with art if it's somehow linked to athletics, McEnroe proclaims: "The greatest compliment I ever received was that I played like an artist."

The Martin/Wegman turn is a hoot. Martin sits at a desk, uttering deadpan declarative sentences that make those of Mr. Rogers complex by comparison. A Weimaraner sulks in the background. Martin gestures with hands that you discover are not his when the man who has been crouching behind him stands up. A favorite Wegman stunt is to give his dogs hands belonging to a hidden human: surely the Weimaraner in this scene is jealous.

Where "Art: 21" shines is in the direct connection it establishes between artists and viewers. The artists tell what they do and why, straightforwardly. Even people conversant with contemporary art will be intrigued by what its creators look like, by the sound of their voices, by their environments. Nauman's enormous studio is a housekeeping nightmare; Sikander's is immaculate. But the series ventures beyond studios, to the extinct volcano where James

Turrell has toiled for a quarter-century; the Michigan skating rink that Maya Lin transformed into a reflection of the heavens; the American Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, a Jeffersonian temple where Ann Hamilton created a 1999 installation that used light, shadow, cascades of color and spoken text in a critique of slavery; the European history painting galleries at The Art Institute of Chicago, where African-American painter Kerry James Marshall explains that while the faces in his works are black, the compositional structure is classical.

In their resolve not to preach, the producers don't try to link artists or concoct "movements." They leave attentive viewers to make their own discoveries.

The series also broadens the images of artists the public identifies with one work, event or subject. The Vietnam Memorial only makes it into the segment on Lin when she frets over having been typecast as a maker of monuments. Her range actually extends from discrete pieces of sculpture to entire buildings. She's a good example of the multiple roles contemporary artists play: landscape designer; architect; engineer; environmental activist; and, in the case of Andrea Zittel, another artist in "Art: 21," experiments in efficient housing.

Richard Serra is best-known for the fuss that ended with the removal of his "Tilted Arc" from its Lower Manhattan sit. The battle gets nary a mention in his episode. You first see him standing in the biggest of all the big galleries in Spain's Guggenheim Bilbao, drawing a picture of his gigantic double corridor of snaking steel. He rhapsodizes about the "elasticity of steel" and reminisces about a ship's launching he saw when he was 4 years old.

Just as Serra's signature is "Tilted Arc," whether he likes it or not, so Sally Mann's trademark is outdoor photographs of her children, nude, which also caused a furor in the art wars of the 1980s and '90s. The subject stems from her own childhood. "I just ran wild for the first seven years of my life," she says. She started photographing her children "because they were there" and they'd accept her direction to achieve effects like long strands of wet hair wrapping around a torso as if outlining its ribs, an image complemented by the rippling water of the river in which the child stands. "We lost a mother and gained a friend," is how one of her children rationalizes growing up with Mann.

Kitsch plays a big part in contemporary art, valued for its lack of monetary value - and of conventional "good taste." John Feodorov calls his incorporation of tchotchkes into totems the "Disneyfication of nature." Feodorov has Navajo ancestry, and some of his works poke fun at the stereotype of the Native Americans' "spirituality."

"I'm not debunking spirituality. I'm not making fun of it," he says, only to reverse himself. "Well, yeah, I am. But only because it's necessary." His performance piece "The Office Shaman" parodies two stereotypes: that of the CEO and the Native-American ritual. The corporate ceremony involves a mask, dirt, and a Hula-Hoop.

Contemporary artists often seem to work with spiritual themes not because they hold certain beliefs, but because they're in search of them. Turrell, I think, is a genuine exception. A lifelong Quaker, he remembers his grandmother taking him to a meeting, saying to him: "We're going inside to find the light." Decades later, he made that phrase tangible fact in his design for the Live Oak Meeting House in Houston. The roof opens to let light stream into the room.

"Art: 21" can't include every favorite of every viewer. Where, I wondered, was Jenny Holzer? Martin Puryear? Not to worry, says Dowling. She and Sollins plan sequels. There's a master list of about 100 artists - and it's growing.

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