2011 PAN Year in Review
CATEGORY DESCRIPTIONS

**Tradition (& Craft) Renewed and Extended**

Contemporary artists in America put a premium on innovation and individuality. We are eager to embrace new materials and technology. At times this seems to come at the expense of traditional craft, concept and technology. A number of entries this year, however, evidenced a strong commitment to traditional forms and materials while infusing them with a fresh perspective. Sometimes this took the form of using a familiar craft in an unfamiliar context. Other works paid homage to the public art of previous epochs. Some artists did what every new generation of artists does, uses materials and technology such as stone, clay, and bronze for the expression of a personal and innovative vision.

**In Situ: When Bigger is Better**

Public sculpture that was in previous decades termed “plop art” or derided as a corporate bauble was, to a great degree, shoved aside in favor of site specific pieces. Site-specific work, at its best, is an innovative and unique response to everything that we mean by “a sense of place” – the physical space, the social space, the historical context, etc. Less successful site specific works devolve into design enhancements, predictable landscaping and architectural amenities. Some of this year’s entries seem to signal a resurgence of the stand-alone sculpture, work that emphatically declares the independence of the artist and the artwork while acknowledging the circumstances of the site.

**Repurposing the Familiar**

Repurposing, or re-contextualizing familiar objects has been a gesture that artists have chosen to employ since the days of Duchamp’s urinal. Repurposing is related to recycling in that it evidences an attention to the problems of excessive consumption and its attendant waste, but in its best form it infuses the familiar with new and often unexpected meanings. Even more challenging, for both the artist and the audience, is work that repurposes familiar concepts and asks us to reconsider our conventional way of seeing and thinking about objects and spaces.

**Community Engagement & Social Activism**

Public artworks, from sculptures of heroes on horseback to expansive murals have traditionally been reflections of the aspirations and interests of the community. In recent decades, members of the community have been increasing encouraged to participate in the creation of the artwork itself. They sometimes become the artwork. The recent evolution of this trend has seen a number of pieces that go beyond celebration of community values to critique of environmental or societal problems. A number of this year’s entries have been artworks used as vehicles for inspiring community activism. In doing so, they have challenged conventional notions of art, intentionally confusing the distinctions between permanent and temporary, audience and performer, formal qualities and function.
New Media and Lightworks

Public space is not only physical space, it is electronic space that may be interconnected with places/phenomenon around the world. These pieces are a reflection of our digital world that is defined by a variety of platforms that can be used for creating and participating in works of art.

Works employing LED technology was one of the larger categories this year. This is a reflection not only of the sophistication and economies of the technology, but of the continued blurring of the boundaries between the arts and entertainment as well as the round-the-clock pace of today’s society. Sculptures go out at night rather than going to sleep.

Humor

Despite Americans’ ravenous appetite for comedy in the movies and on television, we rarely encourage it in public artworks. Is this because of the predominantly sober tradition of public work? Is it because jokes are, by nature, time-based – a repeated joke quickly loses its humor? Is it because the best humor is always at someone’s expense, and therefore is inappropriate for the public discourse? Whatever the case, witty public work is rare. Some of this year’s entries, however, have effectively employed humor.

Visionary Leadership

The context in which a public artwork exists extends beyond the building or plaza that it might inhabit through the immediate audience and the wider community to the institution that commissioned it. It is at this level that vision of the arts administrator and/or consultant is of paramount importance. A comprehensive plan, a unique vision can bring a sense of cohesiveness to the experience of a suite of artworks in a single building or a constellation of works spread throughout a city. Furthermore, the skilled arts administrator is often the artist’s best ally when it comes to negotiating the bureaucracy that often attends the public art process. It is important to recognize both the innovative programs that arts administrators have conceived and their tireless advocacy for the individual artist and artwork.