

# Tucson Weekly

[June 05, 2003](#)   [Arts » Review](#)

## Radical Demonstration

### TMA's 'Biennial '03' defines Arizona art as avant-garde.

by [Margaret Regan](#)

--  
**Arizona Biennial '03**  
Tucson Museum of Art

Some things in Arizona you can count on every single year. The annual late May onslaught of crushing heat. The Legislature's ritual dismemberment of public education. The bulldozing of desert land.

But every two years, just as inevitably, the Tucson Museum of Art does something more fun than all of the above. Its *Arizona Biennial* exhibition ambitiously--and naughtily--redefines art in the state. The *Biennial* used to be an encyclopedic exhibition of all art Arizonan from cowboy to crafts. But ever since it went contemporary back in 1999, it has routinely delivered the shock of the new, with each edition offering up ever more outrageous definitions of what art is.

Consider: This year, the competition was fierce, with just 46 Arizona artists chosen from among 344 who entered (a 13 percent acceptance rate). Among their 57 works selected, from among 869 submitted, is a greeting card rack, just like the one you might see down at the drugstore, only all the cards have already been sold ("True Greetings--Card Rack" by Barbara Bergstrom). In another piece, two cardboard signs hand-lettered by homeless people--"Please Help" and "God Bless You Hungry"--have been purchased by an artist and framed behind glass ("Untitled--Homeless Series" by Rick Levinson). A hanging aluminum cube is embedded with wiggly eyes of the kind that adorn children's stuffed animals ("Space Age Cube" by Bill Dambrova). And a real-life car door frames a lighted photograph ("Objectification Through Isolation" by Sara Abbott).

One artist at the opening last Friday confided that a lot of locals don't like the *Biennial's* new radicalism. Toby Kamps, of the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, who served as guest curator, cheerfully admitted in a catalog statement that he did indeed "look for work that breaks with tradition." But he used traditional principles of excellence. His criteria for selection, he wrote in a statement, were "simple. I looked for technical skill, a powerful idea, and inspiration and originality."

Truth be told, even the most avant-garde of the works ironically obey these classical rules. Levinson's homeless signs, for instance, are among the most moving works in the show. Most of the time, such signs fade anonymously into the streetscape, but here, the artist has rescued them from the urban background and put them into the foreground. Framed and displayed in a museum, the work forces us to notice, and at long last to think about, the people who make these desperate marks on cardboard.