

PHOTOS BY JOHN EWING

Artist-cum-sideshow hawker Franco Mondini-Ruiz puts the marketplace of culture on the sidewalks of New York.

Walking the long and fickle road

VISUAL ARTS

San Antonian represents at the Whitney Biennial

BY JOHN EWING

At the southeast corner of Madison Avenue and 75th Street in New York City, a stair-stepped facade of gray granite reaches out aggressively to passersby. For 70 years, the Whitney Museum of American Art has symbolized the uppermost destination in a professional art career. Like the building itself, the museum's mission to "support living American artists" has loomed over the content and direction of American art since Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney founded the institution in 1931. In particular, the museum's Biennial survey is a bellwether for national and international trends in contemporary art, and like any authority figure, the influence of the Whitney Biennial is as much resisted as it is revered.

For the 2000 exhibition, which opened to the world in late March, the museum altered its selection process somewhat. Ninety-six emerging and established artists were chosen by a diverse panel of curators from across the country, a first for the institution. Explaining the process in the exhibition catalogue, the Whitney's new director Maxwell Anderson states, "we

sought to pay heed to cities and communities other than New York and Los Angeles by having six curators from different parts of the United States review the scene in their own regions and travel to other regions as well." Behind that magnanimous and seemingly objective goal are the more practical machinations of art world politics.

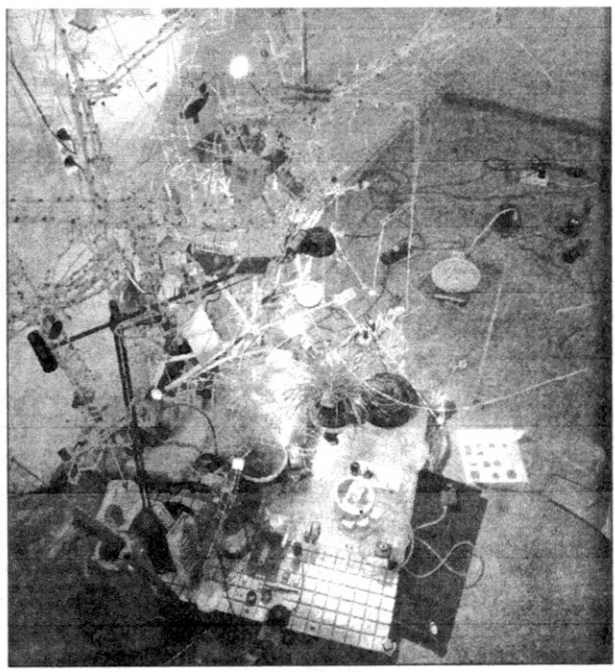
Successfully negotiating his way to the 2000 Whitney Biennial, San Antonio native Franco Mondini-Ruiz has made the grade. The roads that lead a self-taught artist from South Texas to a high-profile institution such as the Whitney are paved with influential people and lucky breaks, and like any pilgrimage, his journey has had surprising twists and fortuitous detours.

Mondini-Ruiz is one of a handful of Latino artists selected for the two-month exhibition. "As cliché as it sounds, Latinos are finally getting a piece of the pie — and who doesn't want a piece of pie!" jokes Mondini-Ruiz, while he tends his "social sculpture." *In-finito Botanica: NYC 2000*, on the sidewalk outside the museum. It's a simple card table laden with dime-store trinkets, small works by artist friends, confections, and religious

paraphernalia gathered from thrift shops and street stalls throughout New York's boroughs. The artist is an engaging salesman, eager to bargain as well as debate cultural observations with the curious shoppers who stop to browse. Combined with



Mondini-Ruiz with Whitney Museum liaison, Ann Wehr



Sarah Sze's Second Means of Egress

Biennial

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his wall-installed grid of similar but elegantly ordered objects inside the museum, Mondini-Ruiz' Biennial pieces are the mature and refined poles that effectively bookend his progression from South Side storekeeper to museum gallery artist. The journey shows in the work.

"For the longest time I was really ignorant. I didn't know I was doing social sculpture, installation work, and conceptual art. I didn't know I was appropriating," says Mondini-Ruiz, recalling the freewheeling years in his South Flores botanica where his decorative combinations of found objects and kitschy curios amounted to what the artist describes as "an ex-voto to life and beauty." Championed by Finnish curator Maaretta Jaukkuri, Mondini-Ruiz was awarded an ArtPace residency in 1996, where he attempted to transfer the botanica to a gallery setting. The objects arrived intact, but the important and energizing concept of diversity within a network was muddled in the translation and failed to rise above its physical counterparts.

By 1999, the view had cleared. Mondini-Ruiz' *In-finito Botanica* reappeared at Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies at Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Friend and fellow San Antonio artist Alejandro Diaz chose Mondini-Ruiz for his Master's thesis exhibition, and the resulting piece launched the artist's New York career. Arranged in squared rows across a low white plinth, Mondini-Ruiz' beautiful and varied array of cakes, toys and vases of colored water found the perfect balance between discrete, unique objects and the formal possibilities in an organized system. The relationship of the individual to a network suggests many different dy-

namics, but most strikingly, the piece resembled a cityscape — perhaps Manhattan — and as such was a harbinger of things to come. Inclusion in the Whitney Biennial, as well as Mondini-Ruiz' current exhibit at East Harlem's Museo del Barrio, is the result and application of concepts inherent in the Bard grid.

The theme of "diversity within a network" could easily link some of the best work in the Whitney's millennial Biennial. Sarah Sze's *Second Means of Egress* is a wildly spiraling system of household objects that effortlessly claims an awkward area of the museum with its own wacky logic. Joseph Grigely's *Untitled Conversations* is a random collection of notes and doodles on scraps of paper carefully arranged to have two distinct registers, one visual and one textual. Doug Aitken's *Electric Earth* is a video projection across three rooms that links diverse sounds and urban images through the poetic persona of a solitary, black youth.

Amid the Whitney Biennial's opening week festivities, an exhilarating mix of artists, writers, New Yorkers, Texans and art enthusiasts of every stripe could be found wherever you wandered. In the museums, the Chelsea galleries, and at the many parties, a network of diverse individuals seemed to hum with a shared passion for art. Arbitrary differences and the divides of geographical distance seemed less important than that greater purpose. As the Biennial curators noted in their collective introduction, "ongoing migrations have generated important aesthetic insights as the artists, reflecting on their journeys, broaden their perception of the world and ours as well." All the roads of art may not lead to the Whitney, but within the network of crossed paths created by the Biennial, artists are defining the rules of working within the world of art. ■