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On Exhibit

Borders Are Eliminated At 'Fission/Fusion'

By Michael O'Sullivan

Washington Post Staff Writer
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THE TITLE of the latest contemporary art exhibition at the Mexican Cultural Institute can be taken in several different ways. On the most obvious levels, "Fission/Fusion: Contemporary Art From Mexico and USA" refers not only to the sometimes enforced togetherness of the show's source countries, but also to the geek-chic aesthetic of some (but not all) of the work, which at times suggests the science lab (X-rays and microscopy, for instance) as much as the artist's studio.

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It could also be taken as a subtle hint about what can only have been the logistical, not to mention curatorial, headaches inherent in a show organized by two different people in cities thousands of miles apart. I can only say that, whatever "fission" interrupted the collaboration between Gabriela Molina, working out of Mexico City, and Berta Kolteniuk, holding down the fort in Washington, the successful "fusion" of two disparate artistic visions gives unexpected resonance and pleasure to the name.

Taken as a whole, the work by the show's artists -- six from Mexico City and six from Washington -- blends very well together. Good luck to any visitor who still thinks it's easy to tell a Mexican artist from a U.S. one. It isn't any more (if it ever was). Wandering through one small gallery after another, where the hanging complements the work, not the geographic boundaries, it's virtually impossible to impose a national identity on anything here. It is, truly, post-political art.

This is not to say that all the work, taken individually, is equally strong. Local favorite Dan Steinhilber, for example, contributes both a stunningly simple tour de force -- an untitled "painting" comprising myriad single-serving packages of duck sauce affixed to the wall in a shimmering rectangular "canvas" -- as well as a somewhat more disappointing installation of white balloons sandwiched between stone columns that suggests high-end party decor.

A standout is Mexican Hector Zamora's "Intersecciones" ("Intersections"). The installation features nylon thread and tiny translucent beads strung taut between the walls of a small room, transforming a nondescript space into an evocation of a star-filled sky as well as a claustrophobic chamber that forces us to contemplate the space our bodies take up.

Washington-based Maggie Michael's latex house-paint puddle paintings work particularly well with their neighbor, an organic rubber sculpture called "Dendra 1" by Maria Jose de la Macorra of Mexico. Two of de la Macorra's countrymen also contribute strong work in the form of Antonio Sanchez's painterly digital prints and a pair of Santiago Borja's eerily lovely intestinal abstractions on canvas.

Local painter Paula Crawford also brings two canvases to the mix, but her Silly String-like abstraction of white squiggles against a hot-pink background is less pungent than her untitled meditation inspired by television footage of Gulf War-era antiballistic missile fire.

Perhaps the biggest disappointment is in the show's video art. Pedro Reyes and Jose Castro's ultimately empty animation is not served well by its proximity to Mauricio Alejo's lackluster photographs of what appear to be Plexiglas boxes. And the out-of-focus footage -- of, I'm guessing here, tree branches -- by

Brandon Morse does not live up to the usually intriguing local artist's best stuff. Andrea Haffner's self-effacing figurative photographs, on the other hand, which also play with the notion of focus (and the lack thereof), evoke far more than the naked human body in their suggestion of death and illness.

Perhaps most emblematic of the show's central theme is Wendy Ross's "Anomaly." It will come as no surprise to fans of the local sculptor, the rare veteran (along with Crawford) in a survey devoted mostly to artists in their late 20s and early 30s, that her work is both beautiful and, in context of the show, potent.

Consisting of two flattened hemispheres -- one made of plastic wine glasses, the other of coiled steel -- the sculpture sits like two halves of a hamburger bun in the Institute's handsome atrium. Originally meant to be shown as companion wall pieces, the artwork serves as a visible reminder of the unexpected felicity that can blossom when opposites -- or at least neighbors -- come together.

FISSION/FUSION: Contemporary Art From Mexico and USA -- Through March 31 at the Mexican Cultural Institute, 2829 16th St. NW (Metro: Columbia Heights). 202-728-1628. www.embassyofmexico.org/mci. Open Monday-Friday 10 to 5. Free.

Public programs associated with the exhibition include:

Wednesday at 6:30 -- Round table discussion featuring local artists from the exhibition and video interviews with their Mexican counterparts. A wine reception follows. Free. Call 202-238-8674.

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