

EXHIBIT SHOWS A WORLD OF FINE ARTISTS

by Kyle MacMillan

Amid the hoopla surrounding Sunday's opening of the Museum of Contemporary Art/Denver's sleek \$15.9 million building in the Central Platte Valley, it seems as though the art on view has nearly gotten overlooked.

And that's too bad. As striking as the David Adjaye-designed structure is, it was designed foremost to house art, and the works inside deserve every bit as much attention as the architecture around them.

To launch this new chapter in the 11-year-old museum's history, Cydney Payton, executive director and chief curator, has organized an ambitious exhibition dubbed "STAR POWER: Museum as Body Electric."

As snazzy as it sounds, the title, which was inspired by the Walt Whitman poem, "I Sing the Body Electric," really doesn't mean much of anything. And it really doesn't have to, because this offering is not a thematic show.

Indeed, it is not really one show at all but rather a group of largely independent exhibitions in seven spaces, each devoted to a different up-and-coming artist from a different country. And on its terms, "STAR POWER" succeeds in virtually every way.

The individual exhibitions, particularly those in the five main galleries, are meant to show off the distinctive qualities of those rooms, and they do. At the same time, they are meant to provide a sense of what visitors should expect to see in the future.

Payton is committed to regular rotations of mostly one-artist presentations of work created in the past 10 years. The emphasis will be on edgy, ultra-contemporary work carrying the must-have imprimatur of Artforum and the big international art fairs.

For the most part, that means photography, video art and installations - the media that dominate "STAR POWER." (There is a room of drawings but not a single painting to be seen.)

While such art can be too trendy and on the inside for its own good, Denver viewers, especially area artists, need to get regular glimpses of what is happening on the global scene, and this new building makes it easier to attract such work and show it.

To her credit, Payton has selected a rich diversity of artists for this debut set of exhibitions. It's hard to imagine anyone liking everything they see, but most viewers should be able to find at least one or two artists toward whom they find themselves gravitating.

With its sense of flash and showmanship, the most popular display is likely to be an untitled installation in the large works gallery by New York artist David Altmejd, who was featured this year at the prestigious Venice Biennale.

He has created a kind of fantasyland in which a group of giant, faceted figures, covered in hundreds of mirrored rectangles, are surrounded by mirrored walls, so that everything reflects everything else.

A few broken mirrors offer a few hints of violence and the variously semi-abstract figures, each constructed in a different style, have a vaguely menacing quality, especially one adorned with masses of dried, dripping candle wax. But the effect overall is benign and even playful.

Another hit should be the American premiere of "Legend (A Portrait of Bob Marley)." The installation consists of 30 stacked monitors showing an equivalent number of people performing a cappella, and more or less in unison, songs from reggae icon Bob Marley's album "Legend."

Candice Breitz, a South African artist based in Berlin, selected Jamaican participants who were all connected in some way with the late singer. The result is a highly original, uplifting work that exudes a warm sense of fellowship and togetherness.

Also notable is a beautifully crafted installation by Rangī Kipa, a New Zealand artist who has managed to stay true to the artistic traditions of his Maori roots while finding a niche within the world of international contemporary art.

Using the basic structure of the Whare Whakairo, a wooden Maori ancestor house, he has constructed a kind of self-portrait, with painted and relief iconography and texts that combine for an involving, personal narrative.

Unfortunately, the work has been scrunched into the small second-level projects gallery, which allowed for the display of just one-half of the house, and even this section does not have the space needed to be properly appreciated.

The exhibition's most traditional works are a beautiful set of 23 watercolors by Chris Ofili, who gained notoriety with his participation in the 1999 display of "Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection" at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York City, condemned "The Holy Virgin Mary," an Ofili painting, which among its other alleged transgressions included clumps of elephant dung attached to the surface.

Overcoming the ensuing firestorm of controversy and probably gaining momentum from it, he has gone on to become one of the world's most sought-after artists. His close friendship with Adjaye ensured his MCA participation.

These sensual, stylized watercolors depict a nude, dark-skinned woman in an assortment of poses, with hints of her sexuality and bursts of color depicting such elements as her lips and jewelry.

Also on view are works by Carlos Amorales of Mexico, Wangechi Mutu and Collier Schorr - both New York artists.