MUCH HAS BEEN made of the fact that there are no clocks in casinos; they are self-contained, timeless, climatically controlled zones of sensory enthrallment. "Casino 2001," the 1st Quadrennial of contemporary art at S.M.A.K. (previously an actual casino), achieves a similar effect. Despite, or perhaps because of the exhibition's ultra-lightweight premise — Las Vegas as Spectacle — it is unencumbered by any real theoretical agenda aside from selecting sixty young artists working in a visually seductive mode worthy of The Strip. This is not necessarily a bad thing. While thin on concepts, what curator Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn has is an eye, which counts for a lot, and like Dave Hickey's "Beau Monde," the exhibition is really about what art brings her pleasure, resting more solidly on taste than argument. Invited by Jan Hoet, Rohatyn, a gallery with no substantial curatorial credits under her belt, may seem a strange choice to inaugurate a major new international showcase, but she follows a trail blazed by Jeffrey Deitch, whose museum exhibitions were highpoints of the '90s. Unlike Hickey's Santa Fe exhibition, which attempted to bring sophisticated cosmopolitanism to America, Rohatyn's "Casino" brings unabashedly cross-entertainment culture to the Old World, grouping international artists in a very American show.

The result is a refreshing antidote to overblown concept shows and burn-out exhibitions, like last summer's Venice Bienale, which leave viewers exhausted, understimulated, and looking for the exit. What "Casino" has is a buoyant energy that delivers a much needed pick-me-up to the art world. This is most evident on the main floor of S.M.A.K. — the nucleus of this far-flung exhibition spanning four locations — a visually tight, successful grouping that includes Olaf Nicolai, Angus Fairhurst, Katharina Grosse, and Ben Edwards, all unleashing bold, supercharged hues. Like Vegas itself, the vibrant glitz can't mask an emotionally dark undercurrent, as in Tom Friedman's festive crime scene, Cameron Jamie's demented suburban violence, and Nic Hess's unusually somber wall work that subtly references the events of 9-11. The coherence breaks down on the second floor, where works from "Casino" are haphazardly installed among the permanent collection, with a few facile juxtapositions (an elegant alien carcass by Inka Essenhigh next to a Francis Bacon) that add little clarity overall.

Curatorially, the exhibition hits bottom in an off-site underground bunker where video works have been installed in raw, dark spaces that, while evocative, have little to do with the art. The "forced march" pace of the flashlight-guided tour left no time to assimilate these time-based works — frustrating, since some works, notably Chilean artist Juan Céspedes' lo-tech meditations, seemed promising.

The exhibition redeems itself in the opulent 17th-century interior of the Bijloke Museum, where many works — such as Maria Marshall's unsettling Caravaggio-like video tableaux — are well-integrated amidst grand fireplaces, parquet floors, and massive chandeliers — though Slater Bradley's bit video installation is unable to command the majestic space it occupies. Highlights here included celebrity cameo appearances by ex-Charlie's Angels Farrah Fawcett (one of the only artists in the show born before 1962) in collaboration with Keith Edmier, and Jan Hoet, who, in a photograph by Malerie Marder, once again upstages everyone — this time by appearing in the buff.