

Ten Million Dollars of Fun

By JOEL SILVERSTEIN

THE BIENNIAL IS BACK IN TOWN. PART ART juggernaut, part Ringling Brothers Circus, the Whitney has always tried to make sense of the contemporary scene amid ever conflicting and spasmodic responses.

For this alone, they deserve some respect. The current Biennial is bound to provoke some comparisons to *Greater New York* currently at P.S.1, but without going into it too deeply, there is a marked difference between the exhibitions in tone and purpose. *Greater New York* favored arid kid stuff, in keeping with the prevailing commercial gallery tendencies of the last few years. The artists were overall exceedingly young and the works reflected goofy asides on consumer society. There was a train set that carried squeezed tubes of paint (which by the way, my son loved) the giant plastic plant, mushrooms in the diorama box, even an exploded and shredded sex doll.

The current Whitney exhibition has these elements too, but is casting a wider net using greater resources.

To begin with, this time the curators were chosen from outside of the Museum. The six individuals come from diverse venues and experiences. For the first time, their focus was not exclusively the New York area, but the entire country. Of course, an accurate assessment of the current trends within the United States is impossible, even given this Museum's time and budget. They simply tried in their words to represent "the best of what's out there."

There is a greater emphasis on painting than would have been expected. Much greater than the exhibition at P.S.1, but not as great as the current buzz in New York regarding the medium's most recent return. There was a conscious effort to include as diverse a body of artists as possible. This includes race, gender, age, geographical area and lack of gallery representation. It's a mark of our time that only the last item on the list is capable of raising an eyebrow. There are a fair amount of unknowns. The night before the press preview, a symposium was held featuring the curators with Michael Brenson acting as moderator. Brenson posed a question to them regarding the nature of regionalism. Their response was fairly consistent in their belief concerning an increasingly homogenized artworld.

Geographical differences play less of a part than they once did. An artist in Lubbock, Texas reads the same magazines as his counterparts in New York, or in Cologne, Germany, for that matter. An articulated goal is to open the institution to a larger public mission. This includes developing forms of outreach, such as written explanations organized by the Communications Department in conjunction with the artists and curators. They are designed without apology to inform a more general audience. I usually find this an abhorrent practice, as it ties people's interpretive ability to a one-on-one correspondence of image to text, but in this case my experience of the printed descriptions was generally harmless. They were well written and informative.

This was also the first Biennial to employ the Internet as a means of processing curatorial ideas as well as having a fully evolved on-site gallery of work created by and for the Internet. This parallels the way video developed circa 1975-80. One of the curators was Jane Farver, the Director of the List Visual Art Center at M.I.T. She described the exhibition's goal in drawing artists to the emerging technologies. She predicted that sources of economic support would be the same for so-called Fine Artists as commercially based corporate ventures. Whatever questions emerge concerning the autonomy of the artist, this process seems to be already occurring.

SIXTY-THOUSAND SQUARE FEET AND A BUDGET of ten million dollars. Is there an overriding aesthetic, or feeling to the exhibition? On this level, can we even discuss a feeling to the work at all, or is it a hodgepodge of every half-baked trend that you are able to see in a contemporary gallery or artist's studio? As mentioned by the curators in the symposium, an unaffiliated artist living in Lubbock, Texas, is going to gear his/her artwork to the larger context of the New York Art market because that's where the money flows. It may not initiate a stylistic trend, but it is evident that regional uniqueness is compromised as backward provincial qualities lessen.

This exhibition, larger than the contents of King Tut's tomb, appears to be more schizophrenic than many Biennials of recent memory. Certainly more happy in its splitedness than the P.S.1 exhibition, which reveled in hollow spectacle. On one hand, there's a leaning towards formal complexity, personal/political content that has some depth, not mere didacticism, aesthetics that exist within constellations or webs of meaning that favor reflection over pre-packaged consumption. Call it a late Modernist residue, like strontium 90 in the milk. On the other hand, permeating many of the artworks, and sometimes within the same work, is a permanent youthfulness verging on juvenilia, a penchant for one-liners, simple jokes, conceptual props, neutralizing emotional weight and 100% gravitational pull de-centering subject capability.

You can look at this as the new image of art as entertainment. It's an impetus that focuses on novelty, easy-to-calculate difference, fashion. The question you ask in its presence is not "Is this an aesthetic experience," but "Is this interesting?" And the interest, more often than not, may be based on your life as a consumer of media. The former tied to High Modernism has moral implications. Like Picasso's *GUERNICA*, 1937, there are good and bad paintings as well as good and bad social and historical situations. The latter, like Postmodernism itself, is not good or bad. It just is. It overwhelms the viewer with its own neutrality and the weight of the institutions behind the work of art. Aesthetics becomes "fun." As the ad says, "Enjoy the ride."

NOW YOU CAN'T SOLELY BLAME THE WHITNEY as the institutional culprit. If anything, this Biennial highlights a current of our era. Whether to continue the program of aesthetic earnestness began by Modernism, or to subvert it by using entertainment as yet

another boundary to be broken, yet another selling point to a much wider audience. A testy question does remain for the curators of this exhibition or any in positions of authority. At what point does the context of the work of art change to meet these demands? It's not a question that can be deflected as easily as the curators think.

As previously mentioned, there is a lot of painting on view, but most of it is likable and middling rather than outstanding. The most successful paintings layer their meanings in ways that frame old/new dualisms. Vernon Fisher, a painter from Texas, presents two beautifully handled Abstract Expressionist works from his *Zombie Series* (*TAZA 1999*, *TUNIS, 1999*). Embedded in the texture of the paint and on the surrounding wall itself are tiny houseflies cast in resin. Is this a comment on the death and resurrection of abstract painting or merely a comment on the death of affect? Likewise, the primacy of the existential gesture is questioned and undermined in the work of Ingrid Calame, whose *B-B-B RR-GR-UF! B-B-B, 1999* resembles a Jackson Pollock painting executed in orange day-glo paint on mylar. Pollock splattered and dribbled, Minimalists flung lead, but Calame traces fluids which stain the street, and reproduces them carefully, like a police blotter. They are not as direct as they appear.

There are examples of a cartoony kind of Realism which seems currently prevalent. John Currin's marzipan Vargas Girls are present, as well as Liza Yuskavage's girl/women resembling Wish-niks (plastic trolls from the 60's). I know they are critical darlings, but the pulp magazines, paperback book covers and toys that form these artists' inspiration are far superior to the paintings on display, and far less mannered. Compare this with Kurt Kampers' three *Diva* paintings; opera singers signifying high art fiction and construct. They are as over the top as Yuskavage or Currin, but less strident.

Right next to Kampers' paintings are video installation rooms. What these rooms demonstrate is that video has clearly hit its adolescence while current painting seems constrained, even constipated. Shirin Neshat, an Iranian woman living in New York has conceived and directed a mini-epic about issues within contemporary Islam. Two projectors simultaneously create one image, like the old stereopticon slides or two-thirds of the final scene in Abel Gance's *Napoleon*. A Fundamentalist leader stirs up the masses to prayer and/or political action. The scene of people galvanized into unity is spellbinding, and more than a little frightening. A curtain or a wall separates the men from the women, each isolated within half of the entire frame formed by the two projectors. A single man and a

woman scuttle to the back of the crowd. A romantic tryst? Pangs of individual longing? The photography of Ghasem Ebrahimian is outstanding, and the whole production sweeps you along with the power and elegance of David Lean.

Local subject matter is presented by Doug Aitken's video, *ELECTRIC EARTH, 1999* representing an African-American male within the seedy but ecstatic confines of urban America (seemingly Los Angeles). The pronouncements of poetry, energy and dance rivet the screen. It's a Neo-noir vision, with a contrapuntal rhythm setting up formal patterns between giant screens. There's motion from washing machines, soapy water, running through strip malls, airports, cyclone fences, rocking beer bottles, disembodied store signs and car tunnels. If there is no great intellectual content here, there is a dynamism and formal invention that reminds one in a crazy way of Bernini's Baroque art.

SPEAKING OF BAROQUE CONVENTIONS IN sculpture, there was a mixture of traditions and materials that exploded in a blending of the boundaries between viewer and art object; a building up of powerful crescendos and a peek-a-boo surprise use of space. The work of Chakaia Booker and Petah Coyne present strong sculptural installations along these lines of thought. Booker, an African-American woman uses discarded tires which she slices and wrestles into overlapping shapes. They recall in her words, "African skin" and the "survival of Africans in the Diaspora." This complex wall relief protrudes in spikey black shapes resembling intestines, organic growth or H.R. Giger's design for *Alien*. They confront the viewer directly in a kind of aggressive tangle that blurs the distance and sucks the viewer into the composition. The transformation and dematerialization of the tires themselves is astonishing, a wise choice of a raw and neglected resource.

Coyne uses many different materials such as hemp, hair and wax. In *UNTITLED -978, 1999/2000*, a false wall was built in the gallery. Commercial statues of saints were buried in the wax, plaster and drywall that were built up over them. From the front, they look like rounded pillars splitting the wall, perhaps the folds of a classical dress, dead white space between them. A closer examination of the reverse of the wall reveals the substructure, swaths of plaster and fragments of heads and hands. Are they in prayer, detached elements of a Gothic wall niche? Or are they immobilized and drowning in hardened material like the so-called cement