

# Art in America

MAY 2008

# Spring in Dystopia



*View of Charles Long's four untitled sculptures, all 2007, papier-mâché, plaster, steel, synthetic polymer, river sediment and debris. Photo Sheldon C. Collins.*

*Lean on visual pleasure but limned with thoughtful commentary on the state of the world, the current Whitney Biennial gives a quieter than usual voice to a general malaise.*

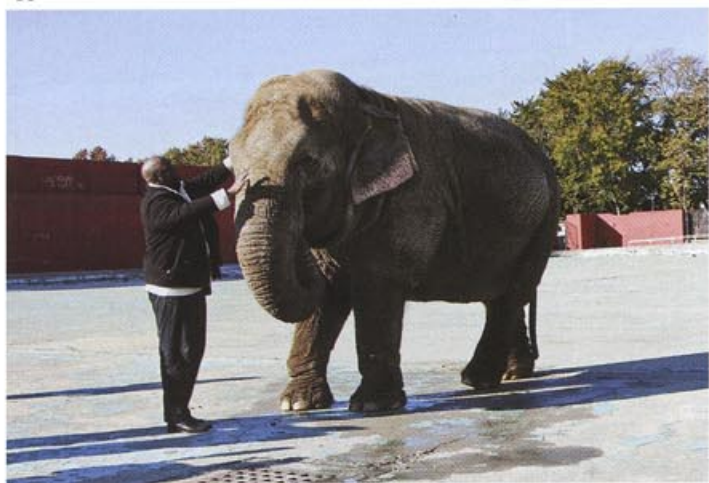
**BY GREGORY VOLK**

**T**his latest Whitney Biennial almost perfectly fits with our prevailing national mood, which is basically anxious, uncertain, filled with questions about what is happening now and what is to come, and still stubbornly if waveringly hopeful. The war in Iraq keeps grinding on. Economic news isn't good; we're very likely headed toward a recession or perhaps in one now. Global warming seems an increasingly dire threat and political gridlock isn't helping things much. We're for Hillary, Barack or McCain, but we're also suspicious of leaders, since we've been betrayed time and again. Overwhelmed by macro troubles, we focus on things close to home, but that proves just as disconcerting and baffling. We'd like to be original, but everything seems borrowed or used. We'd like to make a difference and have an effect, but that seems unlikely, if not impossible. These are the days when optimistic visions seem to be slamming into limits, when a gigantic country that prizes its can-do aplomb seems to be waist deep in confusion, corruption and failure. In the midst of it all, the ever-expanding art world with its superheated market has giddily paraded on, seemingly oblivious to the host of troubles that beset us. Nationally, and also art-worldishly, one wonders when the other shoe is going to drop.

*Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn: Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out, 2006, digital video, 26 minutes.*



*Production still from Javier Téllez's Letter on the Blind, For the Use of Those Who See, 2007, 16mm film transferred to HD video, approx. 35 minutes. Photo Cleverson.*



*Front to back, Jedediah Caesar's Helium Brick aka Summer Snow, 2006; Untitled (hollow box), 2007; and Dry Stock, 2007. Photo Sheldan C. Collins.*

With that background in mind, consider Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's video *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out* (2006), which is surely one of the strangest and also one of the best works in the exhibition. A valkyrie (played by Kahn), wearing a plastic Viking helmet and carrying a big chunk of foam-rubber cheese, has a constant nosebleed as she wends her way through seamy Los Angeles looking for some dire action, for something important (and probably awful) to happen. She's shadowed by an unseen and unheard cameraman (Dodge) whom she addresses, making this mock epic seem like a ludicrous do-it-yourself version of a television reality show. As she points out different things—a pile of charred clothes from a person who may have been immolated, a nearby shoe, perhaps left by someone who has fled, and police cars and ambulances with wailing sirens and flashing lights—and mentions a knifing she witnessed as a kid, the entire scene seems suffused with palpable malevolence. Much in the video is goofy, but this goofiness has a darkly serious side. When, out of the blue, the woman talks about a time when she was in hell and saw a withered miniature man clamber from a wretched pond, she could be referring to a feverish, drug-addled hallucination. But the story also seems completely

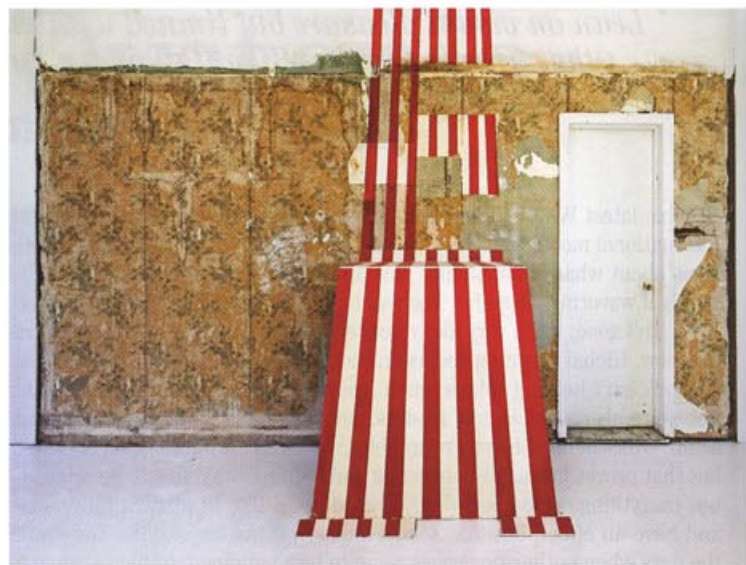
## **Sculptures, installations, videos and performances rule the day: precisely the mediums that are a tougher sell in the art market.**

believable, as if she frequently commutes between this world and the underworld. Suddenly, the video has apt and urgent implications. These are the days when terrorist bombings are commonplace, when torture is policy and we serve, via the media, as constant recipients of accounts of unspeakable horror. Dodge and Kahn's antic, lowbrow video functions as a brooding meditation on an era marked and marred by crisis and violence.

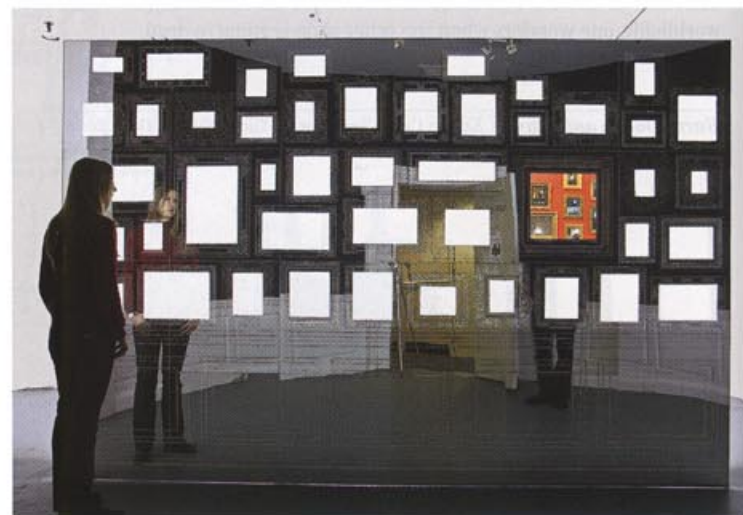
**T**wo young curators from the Whitney, Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin, with input from several older luminaries, have crafted an exhibition in which artists are taking stock of this conflicted era—personally, politically, esthetically and socially—although most aren't attempting to offer wild new breakthroughs. A manageable 81 artists participate, with their work arrayed on three floors of the Whitney and, for three weeks in March, in various spaces and rooms of the cavernous Park Avenue Armory a few blocks away, making for an exhibition that's relatively easy to move through and absorb. Many of the works were specifically made for the Biennial, not culled from recent gallery shows, which is welcome. Big works, bright colors and audacious statements are generally shunned, like the garish decorations from a party that has ended badly. Instead, modestly scaled works in somber colors predominate: there is a great deal of gray, black, brown and beige in this exhibition. Paintings and painting-scaled photography are scarce, at a time when both have been flying off the shelves of commercial galleries and art fairs. In part because paintings are so rare in the show, it is excellent to encounter three colorful, quietly spectacular abstract canvases by Mary Heilmann, in which free-form, oozing blobs advance over chessboard patterns that also hint at kitchen linoleum or tile floors.

Otherwise, this exhibition seems skeptical of visual pleasure and frankly suspicious of a product-oriented art world churning out flashy merchandise. Ruling the day are sculptures, installations, videos and performances: precisely the mediums that are a tougher sell in the art market. As always with the Whitney Biennial, there are legitimate questions about who is included and who isn't, and for what reasons. With 25 or so artists from Los Angeles, a couple from San Francisco and one from Portland, the West Coast is well represented, and that's a good thing. On the other hand, five of those Los Angeles artists are from the same gallery; I guess this is one heck of a time for Susanne Vielmetter Projects. Most of the remaining artists are from New York, which means that these two usual poles—East Coast and West Coast, New York and L.A.—have got a secure grip on the show, yet again, at a time when several regional scenes are flourishing and producing some very interesting art. Recent trips that I've taken to Kansas City and Cleveland introduced me to quite a number of intriguing artists who could easily be included here, and I'm sure this is also the case elsewhere. As publicized in a subway advertisement, this exhibition purports to be about where American art is now, but it appears that artists who have set up shop in the heartland need not apply.

Many works feature found, scrounged or recycled materials, which can occasionally be elegant but more often look damaged and distressed. In another era, artists appropriated and subverted seductive advertisements and commercial products; now they are picking through and finding possibilities in the detritus churned out by overconsumption and unbridled growth. That's one possibility: another is that a large number of these artists are continuing to hone a grad-school esthetic, working with stuff from the Dumpster because it's cost-effective, immediately available and defiantly anti-high-end. Also prevalent are exposed two-by-fours, plywood, concrete slabs, wooden pallets, shipping crates, vinyl wrapping and cracked glass. Raw wood, raw materials, raw psyches: that's what this show



*Lisa Sigal: The Day before Yesterday and the Day after Tomorrow, 2007, drywall, house paint and plaster, dimensions variable. Photo Andres Ramirez.*



*Ellen Harvey: Museum of Failure: Collection of Impossible Subjects & Invisible Self-Portraits, 2007, Plexiglas-and-aluminum frame, oil paintings, mixed mediums.*



*Rodney McMillian: Untitled, 2007, vinyl and thread, approx. 114 by 156 by 48 inches. Photo Robert Wedemeyer.*

communicates, along with a sense that this is an age of uncomfortable dislocation and transition, an in-between era in which the old is breaking down but the new hasn't yet taken shape. Visual art tends to be, well, visual, but here that's just the half of it, or maybe the eighth of it. Throughout this exhibition what's much more important than surface look and appeal are the ideas underpinning them. Just about every artist here is dealing in ideas—about selfhood, the city, the world, history, culture, politics, war-

*Olaf Breuning: Home 2, 2007, digital video, 30 minutes.*



*Julia Meltzer and David Thome: not a matter of if but when: brief records of a time when expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or was still to come, 2006, video projection, 32 minutes.*



*Coco Fusco: Operation Atropos, 2006, video, 59 minutes.*



*View of Omer Fast's The Casting, 2007, four-channel video installation, 14 minutes. Photo Sheldon C. Collins.*

fare and race—but usually not in a shrill way. This much-thinking exhibition seems chock-full of quiet conversations and murmured speculation.

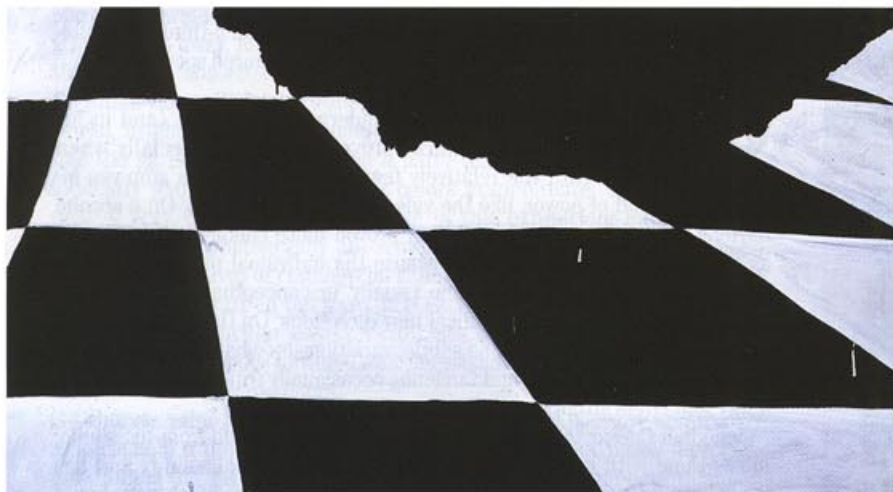
**O**n my first daylong visit, the preponderance of modest (and in my opinion often mediocre) works proved daunting, especially when I compared them with the relatively few pieces that have a stop-you-in-your-tracks kind of power, like the video by Dodge and Kahn. On a second daylong visit, however, the exhibition proved more compelling, but really as the sum of its parts, and not because the individual parts are all that remarkable. Few works wallop one visually, or conceptually for that matter. Even fewer strike out in radical new directions. On the contrary, many offer subtle, and at times not so subtle, variations on what has gone before, exploring lingering niches and tangents, occasionally fruitfully, but rarely in a way that rivets attention or offers enduring insight.

Jedediah Caesar takes scraps, refuse and found objects from his studio, mixes them with liquid resin, lets this interesting gruel solidify and has it cut into different shapes. One of his works is a large block with faded psychedelic colors set atop a rough pallet. Some novelty is involved, and the sculpture looks good, while it obviously recalls Donald Judd's large aluminum cubes, Joseph Beuys's stacks of felt, and any number of Arte Povera works. Alice Könitz, a German artist now based in Los Angeles, presents sculptures that evoke modernist corporate design but are made out of paper, plywood, plastic and other cheap materials, giving them a rickety, somewhat cheesy look—and she's, like, the umpteenth artist to visit this terrain, especially in California. Rodney McMillian's large black vinyl-and-thread sculpture, positioned upright against a wall, sports several appendagelike forms that protrude or dangle down and coil on the floor. It's an unusual combination of painting and sculpture but also a low-risk, less nutty, stationary riff on kinetic sculpture by Tim Hawkinson, with a nod to Eva Hesse. At times it's tough to understand what is gained by seeing new variations on ideas and works already amply explored. In this same room, Heather Rowe presents a structure of upright two-by-fours fitted with strips of drywall and jagged pieces of mirror; it's one of several works suggesting a house just under way, or perhaps an abandoned construction. Gordon Matta-Clark's rugged architectural incisions (cutting through walls, ceilings and floors to get at underlying beams and gaps) and Robert Smithson's various projects with mirrors are evoked, but Rowe's sculpture seems comparatively settled and safe.

Sometimes, however, the bare-bones, less-is-more approach works wonders, usually when the art has a convincing air of mystery, idiosyncrasy and surprise—when it is more poetry than prose, when a discursive attitude (this work is “about” this or that issue) gives way to something that is a great deal more magical, layered and unsettling. For the past several years,

**Where the artworks have an air of mystery, idiosyncrasy and surprise, the bare-bones, less-is-more approach of this exhibition works wonders.**

Charles Long has been working with flotsam found in and around the Los Angeles River, itself a strange nature-culture collision. The river can be lovely, with morning fog, shimmering water, egrets, herons and fertile vegetation, but it is also clogged with garbage and can often feel sinister and dangerous. Beginning in 1938, the Army Corps of Engineers built a massive concrete channel for the river as a form of flood control, and now it looks in places like a gigantic drainage pipe. While on his scavenging hunts, Long noticed that the copious droppings of Great Blue Herons on the river's concrete banks make awfully interesting shapes, which he has photographed: shit, in other words, has its picturesque side. Based on these droppings, his five thin, whitish sculptures made of papier-mâché, plaster, steel, synthetic polymer, river sediment and sundry debris are at once scruffy and utterly



Mary Heilmann: *Spill*, 2007, oil on canvas, 30 by 54 inches.

gorgeous, and grow increasingly evocative as you spend more time with them. One of the sculptures is horizontal, lying on a base of a few pieces of welded steel in a mixture of repose, enervation and, more ominously, mortality. The others rise vertically, reaching toward the rafters (and, perhaps, toward the heavens). At once wispy and brittle, they acknowledge decay but also seem ecstatic, perhaps even transcendent.

Rachel Harrison, who also knows a thing or two about scruffy sculptures that are surprisingly gorgeous, presents a lumpy work decorated with diamond shapes of different hues and three real carrots. This sculpture doubles as a stand for a projector showing *Pirates of the Caribbean* on the wall, but with a twist. Every now and then a voluble chap appears on a split screen peeling carrots and hawking the peelers on the street; he's got the grizzled, weather-beaten look of one of the movie pirates. Harrison makes fleet, peculiar connections between disparate things: a sculpture and a Hollywood movie, pirates with their sharp swords and a salesman with his peelers. Like Charles Long, she stands out as among the most questing and eccentric artists in the Biennial.

We are collectively confronting limitations and restrictions, and Lisa Sigal is, too—quite literally, because she works directly with walls. Cutting into them, excising sections to offer behind-the-scenes glimpses, devising luminous interior chambers that you just barely spy through slits, attaching a protruding section of red and white painted stripes, and applying paint and

plaster to some stretches while leaving others raw, Sigal, in *The Day before Yesterday and the Day after Tomorrow* (2007), makes a hybrid of painting, sculpture and architecture that's part willful damage and part sensitive beauty. Standard walls come alive with a quiet intensity; they've been physically altered but, more significantly, imbued with deep thought, and they shed their status as barriers to become rough yet enthralling forces that you look at and through.

Stephen Prina also transforms a room at the museum so that it becomes an enchanting, rose-tinted elsewhere. With shipping crates that double as cushiony seating, a white curtain hanging in the middle, walls painted a light pink in sections, and a soft floor, his installation is welcoming, perhaps even therapeutic and meditative, but also vaguely eerie. Eight loudspeakers set on one wall and one loudspeaker on another emit the artist's own music (performed with others) including sung lyrics composed of snippets of found texts about art. The overall effect is wonderful. Sense arrives, slips away and arrives again; there is something ironic going on but also something romantic; music, colors, lighting and precisely situated furniture and objects add up to a crystalline purity that somehow—and I still haven't figured out exactly why this happens—puts you on edge. Adam Putnam, on the other hand, uses spare means to create a different sort of transformative interior architecture. A green lamp, fitted with a lightbulb and mirrors, casts shadowy shapes on the walls, which become illusory, yet alluring, hallways and chambers.

Even though the Biennial features a great number of sculptures, many of the more compelling works are videos. One of the exhibition's signature works is Javier Téllez's black-and-white 16mm film *Letter on the Blind, For the Use of Those Who See* (2007), transferred to high-resolution video. It involves an encounter between six blind adults and a thoughtful and cooperative elephant named Beulah. The film, based on an old Indian parable, was shot in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, at McCarren Park, in a huge empty swimming pool built during the Great Depression as a Works Progress Administration urban improvement project. McCarren Pool opened in 1936 and quickly became a landmark; it was, in fact, one of the largest public pools in the world. In the 1970s, during New York's fiscal crisis, it fell into disrepair and seemed headed for obsolescence. New funds were secured for its renovation in 1983, which would seem a welcome thing, but that's when all hell broke loose. Long-time white residents mobilized to fight the renovation, because they'd had it up to here with all those black kids coming into their neighborhood. This put the white residents in a rather peculiar position: they were struggling mightily for decay, mounting adamant protests in favor of entropy and ruination.

In Téllez's film, the six people sit on chairs in the middle of the empty pool. All around them are ruins, empty spaces and graffiti: the broken remnants of utopian ambition. The camera pans to Beulah, entering from the street. She gingerly descends several steps leading to the floor of the pool and comes to a standstill; this is, one imagines, a pretty weird place for her. One by one, when signaled by a strange hypnotic whistle, the people stand up and tap across the pool with their canes, to approach Beulah and touch her. It's an entirely new experience for all of them, the first time they've touched an elephant in their lives. Being blind, they are accustomed to learning a great deal from touch, and you pay attention to the different ways they do so: one man running his fingers languidly over the animal's skin, another whose hands flutter nervously like a hummingbird's wings. The people talk about the sensations, what the elephant's skin feels like to them, and, just like in the parable, each has a different understanding of the creature based on his or her individual experience.

They also offer succinct insights into what it's really like to be blind, including how they deal with the sighted world, and how the sighted world deals with them (not well). These encounters with an animal Other—a really big Other at that—are incredibly moving, and have large implications.



*View of Stephen Prina's multimedia installation The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You: The Queen Mary, 1979-2006. Photo Sheldon C. Collins.*

We're all groping: toward the future, toward other peoples and foreign cultures, toward an acceptance of other people's perspectives, toward a baffling reality that eludes our understanding. The film is spare, yet lush, and filled with powerful images. Close-ups of the people, their faces, and their eyes effectively communicate their humanity. Close-ups of Beulah—her massive flanks, a floppy ear, a huge, sympathetic eye, her dangling tail—are majestic. These details are interspersed with views from on high, and from a considerable distance. The slow action unfolding is sometimes intimate, sometimes extremely remote, and the whole film mixes rigorous investigation with outright wonderment. Téllez's intelligent film has a deep, even primal, emotional pull, evoking our frailty, hesitation and driving curiosity as we move through the world with awkwardness, hesitation and, occasionally, grace.

*Bert Rodriguez: In the Beginning . . . , 2008, performance/installation; at the Park Avenue Armory.*



Several films or videos whose subjects are voyages of quests or discovery suit the much-questioning mood of the exhibition and its fitful search for rootedness. Amy Granat and Drew Heitzler collaborated on *T.S.O.Y.W.* (2007), a two-channel, 16mm film transferred to digital video that is a hefty 200 minutes long. Loosely based on Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, this marvelous film concerns a young motorcyclist futilely looking for something, presumably of enduring meaning, as he navigates through the American West. His travels take him down endless roads, through bountiful, rugged scenery and to such icons of Land Art as Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* and James Turrell's *Roden Crater*. Shifting between color and black and white, often coupling steady images on one side with sputtering, herky-jerky footage on the other, the film conveys a mood both mournful and elegiac: here is a promised land from which promise has drained.

In a truly inspired curatorial decision, this film was presented near another collaborative video, by Julia Meltzer and David Thorne, made in Damascus, Syria, and featuring energetic (to the point of manic) monologues in Arabic (with English subtitles) by the young Syrian performer Rami Farah. As you watch Granat and Heitzler's slow-paced, lonely and ultimately sad excursion into wide open American spaces, you hear Farah's scathing, stream-of-consciousness rant, in Arabic, on justice, peace, conflict, poison, God, torture and love, among other topics. The two videos are compelling on their own, but also subtly converse and evoke the troubled relationship between the United States and Arab countries.

Olaf Breuning's video *Home 2* (2007) features another main character who constantly chatters into the camera. This time it is an irrepressible young American man (played by an actor) who's part of a tour group in Papua New Guinea. As this fun-loving guy goes about his hijinks—dancing with the natives, tossing out money to kids who are rooting about in a garbage dump, clowning around holding a gorilla mask, cavorting through a ragged outdoor market—whopping issues come into focus: Western privilege versus Third World privation, racism, cultural stereotyping, and Americans who consider it right and natural to energetically blunder into situations that they poorly understand.

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# Whitney

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As with Breuning's video, there are a quite a few political works in the show that approach issues through subtlety and indirection rather than head-on. Adler Guerrier, a Haitian based in Miami, presents an installation of documentary photographs, drawings and video concerning Liberty City, in 1968 the primarily black Miami neighborhood that was convulsed by riots and turmoil in the wake of the Republican Convention held that summer in Miami Beach. The artworks are ascribed to "BLCK," an artists' collective from the period, but the twist is that Guerrier invented BLCK and made all the works himself. Utilizing fiction and conflating fraught history with current times, Guerrier portrays a neighborhood that has long been a flashpoint for racial conflict. In *Divine Violence* (2007), Daniel Joseph Martinez presents the names of fanatical terrorist organizations lettered neatly in black on gold automotive paint on wood panels. As you move through his installation you encounter Al Qaeda, the Lord's Resistance Army (which has wreaked havoc in Uganda), Revenge of the Hebrew Babies, Generation of Arab Fury, the right-wing Seikijuku (Sane Thinkers School) from Japan, Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Fatherland and Liberty), and the Nuclei for Promoting Total Catastrophe, an anarchist group from Greece that favors arson, among many other organizations—including, significantly, the U.S. private military contractor Blackwater. Martinez makes no comment on the groups, but his lack of a statement speaks volumes, and he lets the viewer fill in the gaps.

Extremist ideologues, whether members of a group sponsored by a powerful government (the KGB, Blackwater) or acting independently, are, alas, a big part of a geopolitical climate in which impassioned belief, oftentimes rooted in violence, licenses hideous acts. Coco Fusco, in her video *Operation Atropos* (2006), makes CIA secret prisons and events at the now infamous Guantánamo Bay visceral and immediate. She, along with six other women, voluntarily participated in an ultra-realistic capture and interrogation program designed by former U.S. soldiers to prepare clients in the event of being seized. Humiliation, psychological manipulation, calamitous issues of gender, coercion and resistance to coercion are all on display, and even though this was a voluntary, play-acted ordeal in which no one was injured, it is hard-hitting, exposing the appalling nature of actual interrogation and torture.

Omer Fast's *The Casting* (2007), a 35mm film transferred to four-channel video, presented on the front and back of a double screen, is another of the exhibition's signature works. On one side, you see an American soldier being interviewed by a director. The soldier recounts a tumultuous roadside bombing in Iraq, during which, afraid and confused, he shot and probably killed an innocent young Iraqi man who was a backseat passenger in a car whose driver refused to stop. His account of this horrific event is spliced with another of an encounter he had with a young woman in Germany while he was on leave. She turns out to have been a serial self-mutilator who had compulsively sliced up her body with razor blades. On the other side of the screens, actors stage in tableaux vivants both the interview (as a casting call) and the events, supposedly in preparation for a future film. Always, the transitions between Iraq and Germany, war and a would-be affair, guns and razor blades, are seamless but jarring, while Fast's conflation of actual events (albeit filtered through one person's memory) and their fictional restaging is masterful. Both sides of the screens explore the terrifying impact the war in Iraq has had on one person's psyche, but that individual psyche connects with the nation's psyche as well.

There are several other works that focus squarely on self, but, in the best of these, selfhood intersects with far larger matters. The brilliant conceptualist, sculptor and performance artist Michael Smith is principally known for offbeat projects featuring himself as his nerdy and eager, yet frequently befuddled, alter ego, "Mike," going about normal daily affairs. (Stretching back to the late 1970s, Smith's willfully banal "acted self" anticipates the television sitcom "Seinfeld" by 10 years or so.) Smith

has been teaching at the University of Texas in Austin since 1999, and each semester he makes a class photograph at a local Sears: the smiling professor surrounded by his students. In a series of these photographs, which suggest high-school yearbook photos, Smith, as both professor and artist, as both Michael Smith and "Mike," manages to look at once engaged, detached, smilingly open, emotionally uncomfortable, forthright and ironic, and that's quite a feat. You also see how he slightly ages through the years, while each new crop of hopeful students remains energetic and young; these deceptively mundane class photographs situate Smith in relation to a larger scale of time, to cycles of regeneration and decay.

Ellen Harvey sticks very close to home—or, more precisely, to her painting studio, where she spends a great deal of time—in her two-part "Museum of Failure" (2007-ongoing), which is one of the wonders of the Biennial. On a freestanding illuminated Plexiglas wall, ornate hand-engraved frames surround glowing sanded-out rectangles and squares, which essentially function as absent or blank paintings. Titled *Collection of Impossible Subjects*, it evokes all the million things that you can't see and that you don't understand, as well as things that aren't represented and that don't make it into famous museums. Looking through an opening in this structure, you see *Invisible Self-Portrait in My Studio*, a large painting comprising dozens of small, exquisite paintings, once again in ornate frames. These paintings within a painting disclose snippets and slices of Harvey's studio, including furniture and art tools, along with self-portraits based on photographs of the artist's reflection in a mirror; in the paintings, her face is obscured by the camera's bright flash. The whole work turns the basic action of composing a painting then exhibiting it in a museum into a complex investigation of slippery realities, elusive knowledge, absence and presence, and into an unstable whole that breaks down into multiple fragments. It is also visually stunning.

The Biennial's temporary extension into the Park Avenue Armory, in conjunction with Art Production Fund, was most noteworthy for performances, concerts and events. These included a concert by the band Wilderness arranged by Charles Long, in dialogue with his video projections and a performance by his young son in a silver suit; therapy sessions by Bert Rodriguez in a specially constructed and decorated white cube; 24-hour film events by Walead Beshty; dance sessions and a dance marathon by Agathe Snow; a relaxing cot-filled enclosure by DJ Olive featuring soothing ambient music; a working bar/sculpture by Eduardo Sarabia; and a public portrait-drawing performance by Ellen Harvey. All went way beyond how artworks are usually approached in a museum. Much less successful were site-specific sculptures and installations, which often seemed overwhelmed by the grandiose surroundings and produced few memorable moments.

Absent from this Biennial are much-hyped artists who have been lauded up and down by powerful galleries, collectors and commerce-oriented art fairs, and that's refreshing. The curators' antipathy to glamour and glitz is likewise welcome. When the exhibition falters, and it falters far too often, it's because the artworks are too derivative, too average, not distinctive enough, too dogged, just too—when you get right down to it—minor. When it really clicks, singular artworks mesh with and extend the curators' interest in "lessness" (a term used by Henriette Huldish in her catalogue essay, which she borrowed from the title of a Samuel Beckett story). Seemingly little things—one soldier's memories, a heron's excrement, a rambling walk through Los Angeles, the surprise and pleasure of touching an elephant for the first time, a solo motorcycle trip, a decision to alter and puncture the wall that's right in front of you—seem vastly important and intersect with countryside, perhaps worldwide, aspirations and fears. □

*The 2008 Whitney Biennial is on view in New York at the Whitney Museum of American Art [Mar. 6-June 1, 2008]. Early in its run, some installations and events were mounted at the Park Avenue Armory [Mar. 6-23]. The show is accompanied by a 270-page catalogue with essays by the curators, Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin.*

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