

Lessness

The Whitney Biennial.



By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)



Works on exhibit at the Whitney by (clockwise from top left) Charles Long (foreground) and Ruben Ochoa; Omer Fast; Rodney McMillian

(foreground) and Olivier Mosset; and John Baldessari. Photographs by Gus Powell.

This year's Whitney Biennial, the most poetic I can remember, feels mildly unhappy and restlessly alert. If it were a sound, it would be the muttering of a cast awaiting the inexplicably delayed rise of a curtain. The show confirms impressions of a new, gray mood among younger artists, one at odds with the recent prevalence in international art of both commercial glitz and festivalist brass. Call it a decline in producer confidence. Who is making art? For whom? Why? As usual at the Biennial, few good answers are in evidence. But, for once, bad answers prove almost as elusive. The show is conventionally anti-conventional, like most of the world's biennials, in its emphasis on installations and videos and its paucity of painting in particular and of traditional mediums in general. Its strongest suit is certain types of sculpture that have flourished lately—the same assembled, shaggy varieties that dominate “Unmonumental,” the inaugural, solid show of the New Museum, downtown. Yet this Biennial is remarkably free of forced ideas, despite an occasional appeal to ecological virtue. It is full of busy ingenuities that smack of art school—but of art-school studios, not seminars. Two decades of academic postmodernizing have trailed off into embarrassed silence. One of the show's curators, Henriette Huldish, writing in the catalogue, borrows a title of Samuel Beckett's to characterize the Zeitgeist: “Lessness.” Not less is more. Less is all—get with it. (Good old Beckett, the never-fail appliance for glamorizing malaise.) I favor being encouraged. There isn't a lot in the show to like very much, but the over-all tenor puts me in mind of the “aridity” that, according to another exigent author, John of the Cross, is a key stage in the “dark night of the soul,” preceding redemption. Even if little comes of it, the drama of this state—a sort of exasperated modesty—will etch the 2008 Biennial in memory.

“An Ideal Disjuncture,” a big sculpture by the Los Angeles artist Ruben Ochoa, is a case in point. It is made of unprepossessing stuff: jumbled slabs of cement on wooden pallets; an off-kilter cement shape, like a blasted tree trunk, sprouting naked rebar; a swooping expanse of chain-link fence. It evokes a municipal construction site subjected to an earthquake. Ochoa, born in 1974, is an artist with a socially critical bent, whose past works have included shows that travelled in his family’s tortilla delivery van and murals of absent natural landscapes on freeway containing walls. But a formal impulse overqualifies “Disjuncture” for discursive purposes. A sheer and ungainly fact in the room with you, the work transposes features of banal reality—chiefly the look and feel of concrete, the ur-material of Los Angeles—into qualities to savor. Whatever it started out to mean has been waylaid by fascination. The effect is a stuttering, halfway transcendence. Imagine a stranger who has forgotten his name and importunes you, on the off chance that you know it. It is an awkward moment, but he is a pleasant stranger. Works by Charles Long are similarly befuddling: vaguely Giacometti-esque, vaguely figurative skinny sculpture in papier-mâché, plaster, and assorted debris on steel armatures, their forms derived from found patterns of bird droppings. Bizarre in the mind while lovely in the eye, they make for another odd halt, marked by mutual, cordial incomprehension. Then there’s Rachel Harrison, the leading light of new sculpture, with objects and collages that combine trashy bric-a-brac, vulgar images, and slathered paint with an uncanny confidence, as if she knew precisely what she means—and you would, too, if you were just the littlest bit smarter than you are.

The few painters in the show are well chosen and register keenly. The veteran abstractionist Mary Heilmann is famous for what may at first look to be fast, brushy messes but which

hang together with the mysterious cogency of free jazz. Three new pictures that are challengingly woozy, even for her, broadcast a smiling sympathy with the show's bravely irresolute youngsters. Karen Kilimnik, with a typical installation of girlishly romantic canvases on themes of bygone European aristocracy, in a room with a pretty chandelier, offers similar reassurance, to the effect that confused feelings are a problem only if you insist on making them one. Sharply surprising is the inclusion of taciturn paintings of benumbingly ordinary suburban streets by the finest of the first-generation photo-realists, Robert Bechtle, whose style has hardly varied in more than forty years. But take their philosophical measure: a stony refusal to believe that we ever know what we see, put to a test of things—dull houses, parked cars—that seem too obvious to merit even passing attention. Like a struck tuning fork, Bechtle's skepticism finds harmonic vibrations in works by young artists of otherwise unrelated sorts. I detect something like it in Lisa Sigal's constructions of raw and painted wallboard and plaster, doors, and lighted enclosures, with irregular panels of Daniel Buren-like painted stripes. Sigal is one of several Biennial artists working with architectural elements on an architectural scale, in quizzical and anxious ways—as if asking, What is this place? Sigal has installed small, dilapidated scraps of stripe painting in the museum's stairwell, where they suggest unbidden thoughts of a worried mind.

So many melancholy characters roam the screens of the show's video projections that you're apt to contract the existential blues, too. In "Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out," by Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn, a woman in a plastic Valkyrie helmet, carrying a hunk of foam-rubber cheese and dabbing at an unexplained nosebleed, chatters compulsively while conducting the camera operator on a desultory tour of

nocturnal, woebegone Los Angeles places. It's funny and alarming. Omer Fast's "The Casting" is a four-channel virtuoso exercise, in interview and live-action formats, based on an American soldier's anguished memories of dating a mad, self-mutilating woman in Germany and, worse, accidentally shooting a civilian in Iraq. The hero of Olaf Breuning's "Home 2"—which might better be titled "Global Jackass"—is a manic tourist who, upriver in Papua New Guinea, blathers about his fun encounters with native populations worldwide. We see him prevailing on polite pedestrians in Japan to pose for the camera in garish bunny masks. You want to slap him. "T.S.O.Y.W."—an abbreviation for "The Sorrows of Young Werther," Goethe's novel of tormented youth—by Amy Granat and Drew Heitzler, could stand as this Biennial's signature piece. In images shown on two screens, a lone motorcyclist interminably prowls the Southwest, stopping at odd roadside sites (a "Cowboy Church," which is closed) and at famous earthworks, including Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty." (An incidental beauty of the work is that it was shot in 16-mm. film, with sensuous under- and overexposures that lend a nostalgic air of modern antiquity.) Gradually, the biker comes to seem a contemporary every soul, atingle with life that may or may not prove to have been worth living.

In the Biennial's aesthetic background—and foreground, in concurrent installations and a program of performances at the Park Avenue Armory—is a burbling, flimsy abundance of collaborative and participatory activities. At the Armory, viewers may write on strips of red flannel that will be woven into Rapunzel-like braids of artificial golden hair, make music by touching electrical wires, knock back shots of homemade tequila (at set times), lie down on cots in a jungle-style "triage" tent, and sign up for closeted psychotherapy sessions with an artist who cheerfully admits

to being wholly unqualified for the job. Such stunts give me a “you had to be there” feeling, even while I’m there. But they are harmless enough, and they do reinforce a Beckettian motive of, having nothing to do, doing something. One work enchanted me. In a darkened room, partly cluttered with personal and studio detritus, sounds are heard. They are a live feed from a microphone in a rural field in Kansas, the native state of the artist, Rashawn Griffin. It was windy out there, and there was traffic on an apparently nearby road, when I dropped by. A tremendous sense of displacement and loss, in empty distances, grew on me. I found myself listening intently, as if for something revelatory—perhaps the *vroom* of Young Werther’s motorcycle, questing past in the suddenly exact middle of nowhere. ♦



- *Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine’s art critic. He is the author of “[The Hydrogen Jukebox.](#)”*

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