

Whitney Biennial 2008

A tepid Biennial inspires neither hate nor love.

By Howard Halle Tue Mar 18 2008



Installation view *Photograph: Roxana Marroquin*

The past few years haven't been terribly kind to the Whitney Museum of American Art. Plans for a Renzo Piano–designed addition to its UES location, for instance, had to be shelved in favor of a branch near the High Line, though in this softening economy, I wouldn't bet on that happening soon. Meanwhile, the New Museum grabbed headlines by opening a glittering new home on the Bowery. In the same vein, the Whitney's franchise exhibition, the Biennial, is no longer the only game like it in town, thanks to the proliferation of international art fairs like the Armory Show. Since

the peak of the Biennial's importance in the '80s and early '90s, its relevance has steadily declined. Certainly, it's been a long time since it lived up to its reputation as the show everybody loves to hate.

The '08 edition isn't about to change that. It offers little to get the blood boiling or even set the heart racing. Although there are plenty of good artists here, the show overall seems desultory, even sad. When the work here isn't visually receding into the walls, it's dealing in content that is downright depressing. If curators Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin set out, in part, to plumb the American psyche as expressed through art, they surely weren't wrong to find a Prozac nation desperate to numb itself against the cataclysms of the Bush Age. It's a bummer all the same, made even more so by an installation that seems as congested and disheveled as the apartment of somebody who refuses to get out of bed.

Crowding is a problem historically with Whitney Biennials, and this iteration, besides filling the entire building, includes an adjunct program of performances and site-specific pieces (running through March 23) that spills over to the Park Avenue Armory. Yet, overstuffed as it is, the show stints on painting and sculpture while giving the preponderance of the space over to video installations. Again, typical for the Whitney, though, the choice is appearing less like a function of some idea that video is intrinsically cutting-edge, than a realization that average museumgoers now expect fare that's similar to what they get at the multiplex.



Installation view

Photograph: Roxana Marroquin

Like recent Biennials, this one sprinkles established and midcareer artists—names like Mary Heilman, Robert Bechtle, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine and others—among the thirtysomethings to give their work a chance to be re-evaluated in the context of the latest thing. It's a laudable goal, but one sabotaged by stingy selections that give the old-schoolers short shrift. Maybe the curators didn't want them to show up the youngsters—not hard given how an alarming percentage of the work here barely rises above the level of graduate school.

Even so, there are numerous stand-outs, including contributions by Left Coast artists. Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's kooky video, *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out*, shows Kahn dressed like a Valkyrie whose Valhalla is Wal-Mart. She's accompanied by Dodge's character—an itinerant news cameraman looking to score some "action," i.e., Rodney King-style footage. Together, the pair move through the dicier precincts of L.A., as Kahn, framed by Dodge's POV, spews a bizarre and hilarious stream-of-consciousness monologue. Playing Virgil to Dodge's Dante, Kahn conducts a tour through the City of Angels as a psychotic hell. Also first-rate is Edgar Arceneaux's video, *The Alchemy of Comedy...Stupid*, in which the artist enlists the aid of former *In Living Color* star David Alan Grier. Grier appears in multiple views as he delivers a stand-up riff on his family and father. The routine, you soon realize, is Arceneaux's vehicle for meditating on the meaning of "post-black."

New York is well represented by a room devoted to Rachel Harrison's delirious stew of painting, photography, video and sculpture. At its center, a sort of Cubistic, harlequin-patterned home-entertainment console projects overlapped sequences of a street huckster hawking potato peelers, and Johnny Depp's Jack Sparrow wandering through a pirate limbo. Harrison, whose speciality is deconstructing masculinity, seems to be suggesting that there's little left for men to do in a postfeminist world except perform like circus clowns. The same, alas, could be said for artists dealing with a global art scene in which all that matters is money.

Interestingly, Harrison's best works to date aren't in the Biennial. Why? Because they're downtown in the New Museum's inaugural exhibition. Given the increasing competition for resources and attention, you have to wonder how long the Biennial, and maybe even the Whitney itself, can last unless it seriously steps up its game.

Whitney Museum of American Art, through Jun 1