

The texture of life in a few instances

The American Effect: Global Perspectives on the United States 1990-2003, Whitney Museum of American Art

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The American Effect: Global Perspectives on the United States 1990-2003, *Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, July 3-October 12, 2003*

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The idea of bringing together an international body of artists whose work sheds light on how America is experienced by the rest of the world at a time when the policies of the US government are causing such obvious devastation is worthwhile in principle. Therefore, it is all the more disappointing that there is so little art in this exhibition that expresses serious insight in an aesthetically satisfying manner.

In order to bring together these 47 artists and three collectives, curator Lawrence Rinder visited nearly 20 countries in Latin America, Asia and Europe. (Due to the impending war in Iraq, the Middle Eastern leg of his journey had to be cancelled.) The selection does not claim for itself the scientific status of an international survey of popular opinion like the Pew Report, nor does it aspire to be objective or comprehensive. The artists exhibited may never have been to America, nor have had any direct experience with it. All that is required is an imaginative engagement with the “idea” of America.

Having cast their net so broadly, the exhibitors have collected a surprisingly homogenous group of works, both stylistically and thematically, which suggests a convergence of several factors. In the first place, artists of a stature to get into a Whitney exhibition are hardly sequestered in their own countries, but already form a largely international group, producing a fairly uniform body of work for a shared pool of collectors and institutions. No doubt, the curators also selected works for their “engaging formal or conceptual qualities,” and passed over pieces that may have been more genuinely interesting but diverged from the prevailing preference for technically adept and conceptually savvy artwork.

Finally, the hamstrung perspective of the American art world is patently demonstrated. Made anxious and even alarmed by the policies and activities of the American government but still tied to the establishment by many threads, its opposition is conflicted and contradictory. This lack of wholeheartedness may not be entirely conscious to the upper echelons of the art world, but finds expression in art that is often either befuddled in its criticism, or else glib and pretentious.

It is less a question of what these pieces fail to achieve, than what they don't seem able to even attempt. Art, to be worthy of the name, must communicate life as it is experienced by actual human beings in their social context at a given point in time. That is not to say it must take one particular artistic form, such as realism, or that the subjects of such art must be of a certain social type. The greatest artists are those whose work demonstrates compassion and insight across a range of human experience, and shows how this is conditioned by the socially and historically decisive

forces, even as they operate on specific and intimate situations.

This perception of life can be expressed in any number of formal ways, but in the absence of such concerns, or even their definite rejection, other accomplishments remain superficial, as is all too readily demonstrated in this exhibition. The predominant tone is not one of empathy in examining the effects of US policy on people's lives in other countries, but rather variations on the ironic. Irony has a place, but a limited scope.

The show opens with *Nursing Home* (2002), a life-size sculptural tableau by French artist Gilles Barbier, in which the American superheroes have aged and are now pensioners in an old age home. Superman is using a walker, Captain America lies hooked up to an IV on a gurney being wheeled by Wonder Woman. The Hulk and Cat Woman sprawl, dully dozing, in front of a TV blaring music.

One's first response is to laugh. The costumes are so perfect, yet perfectly incongruous on these old people's bodies. The resin modeling faithfully captures the sag of old skin, the varicose veins in hands and feet, to the point that one finds oneself laughing not so much at the idea that America-as-Super-Hero is over the hill, but at old age itself, which is presented as impotent, pathetic and sad. It seems a gratuitously cruel response to evoke.

Other artists insert American politicians into art forms from other traditions in incongruous ways. In “History till September 11” from her series *Bush* (2002), Pakistani artist Saira Wasim paints a take-off of Raphael's *School of Athens* in the style of a Mughal miniature, but with the figures of the philosophers welcoming George W. Bush as they draw up plans for missiles, instead of being engaged in any serious pursuit of knowledge. The tiny figures are bland, lacking both the physical power of Raphael's figures as well as the exquisite jeweled stillness of an actual miniature.

Artist Zhou Teihai paints former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani as a “great leader” in the style of Chinese socialist realism, with garish airbrushed colors on a large scale in *Libertas, Dei Te Servient!* (2002). A couple of balls of elephant dung are painted in the lower corners to remind us of Giuliani's censoring of the art show *Sensation* at the Brooklyn Museum.

In both instances, the high artificiality of the artistic style accentuates the strained nature of the comparisons. Has G.W. Bush attained the stature of Plato or Giuliani that of Chairman Mao? Irony that is this broad says little.

Another example of one type of unexpectedly, as another is the series *German Americans* (1997-98) by Andrea Robbins and Max Becher. These are impeccable, large-scale color photographs of Germans who like to dress up in authentic Native American costumes. It is amusing to see blonde Germans peeking out from under feather headdresses and holding powwows by teepees. No doubt the fantasy of being the noble savage has deep roots in the German psyche, but in the context of this exhibition, these photographs end by trivializing the tragic consequences of this cult of the “volk” by a segment of the German population. What these images mean to say about Native Americans, if anything, is convoluted at best.

These works are typical in their use of cultural pastiche and “blenderism.” Their observations about American life and their own traditions rarely go beyond the shallow and uninformative. America is a set of familiar stereotypes—rich, materialistic, wasteful, shallow, culturally chauvinistic, naïve, and so on—which when served up by the Whitney Museum in the name of genuine criticism, starts to seem rather self-serving.

Mark Lewis’s video *Jay’s Garden, Malibu 2001* epitomizes this. In a smooth single shot, the camera follows scantily clad porn stars as they traipse through an exquisitely landscaped Southwestern garden. They trot up and down hillsides, appear and then vanish amongst cacti and other exotic plants, while engaged in tantalizingly unspecific activities. Under the harsh blaze of an American sun, the Garden of Eden has become the set of *Paradise Island*.

Some pieces attempt to be more probing, but are inconclusive and jumbled. In *Arrest* (2003), Chilean artist Cristóbal Lehyat covers two walls of a room with line drawings of images taken from the American media. Without defining visual clues they remain obscure, but the caption explains they depict a Hazmat team cleaning up after an anthrax attack, a Congressional swearing-in and Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. Under a wooden shelf in the corner on the floor, projectors show two small slides—one of the courtyard of a Chilean military school and the other of the viewing platform of Ground Zero in New York City. Juxtaposition is felt to be enough to draw a meaningful relationship between the disparate elements. Once again, a clever presentation covers for insufficiently interpreted content.

Those pieces which go beyond the ironic generally protest US exploitation of other nations and peoples. Most of these are from a “Third World” or post-colonial perspective, such as *MaMcKinley* (2001) by Alfredo Esquillo, Jr. The artist has painted a pseudo-Victorian portrait of a bonneted and beribboned matron holding a baby in a white ruffled dress, but the faces have been cut out and replaced with that of a Filipino baby and of President McKinley, the US President who led America’s first imperialist venture to conquer the Philippines after a bloody three year war (1899-1901.) The baby is wincing, and “Ma” is stern and

uncompromising, with hands that have become an eagle’s talons.

Some of the openly hostile pieces express a vengeful attitude. Prominent among these is *A Picture of an Air Raid on New York City* (1996), by Japanese artist Makoto Aida. In return for the American bombing of Japanese cities in World War II, he envisions Japanese fighter planes circling in an infinity sign, raining fire and devastation on midtown Manhattan. To lend his vindictive image greater legitimacy, he refers to the genre of hell scenes in Japanese tradition known as *Jigoku-ezu*, and paints on a folding screen like that of the Muromachi dynasty (1339-1573), but using cheap paint instead of gold leaf, and propping it on plastic milk crates. “I am not in favor of attacking America,” Aida says, “but this is an image that came into my mind.”

A significant number of works in the exhibition are video pieces, and several of these focus on the supposedly over-abundant wealth and consumerism in the US. Maria Marshall’s *President Clinton, Memphis, November 13, 1993* video shows her two young sons in an elegant, empty ~~whisper room, which quickly fills with packages.~~ As they enthusiastically unwrap them, filling the space with a riot of vivid red tissue paper, the lisping voice of one of the boys reads from one of then-President Clinton’s speeches, extolling the value of hard work and discipline as a role model for our children.

This idea that America is a land overflowing with stuff which is wastefully squandered is accepted as fact. All that the piece points out is the hypocrisy of Clinton, and by extension American society, calling for discipline when we are in fact over-indulging ourselves. This reflects an economic abundance that is a reality for a minority of Americans at best.

America’s consumerism is shown to be grotesque to the point of obscenity in Bjorn Melhus’ video piece, *America Sells* (1990.) After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the filmmaker happened upon a “goodwill” pep rally in which cheery teens were promoting American corporations. The footage was edited to accentuate the hideousness of these almost rabid-seeming young Americans jumping up and down in cheerleader outfits and chanting “Buy, Buy, Buy, T-Shirts, Cheap,” and so on.

That artists are openly criticizing the US role, particularly its economic impact, on the rest of the world is a beginning. It is to be hoped that artists will take their analysis beyond the obvious to articulate a serious political stance. In the meantime, what is called for is a more attentive and compassionate portrayal, with fewer unnecessary special effects, of those impacted most strongly by the “American Effect”—namely ordinary working people in other countries, and in the US itself.

Two pieces seem willing to go in this direction: the mistaken focus of the first undermines it completely, whereas the second succeeds in spite of one major flaw.

Chinese artist Danwen Xing takes as his subject the so-called “e-waste” that is dumped by the US in Guangdong province in southern China to be recycled by local laborers. He does not take photographs of the actual towns, named ironically for their specialties like HP Laser Jet Town, where this takes place. Instead his *disCONNEXION* series (2003) of photographs shows close up jumbles of computer circuitry whose formally abstract patterns are considered “strangely beautiful testimonies to the normally invisible consequences of America’s environmental and export policies.” But the consequences of the “American Effect” remain largely invisible, if not obscured, by these images.

On the other hand, Andrea Geyer’s piece *Interim* (2002) manages to achieve an evocative quality that endures beyond the viewing. The strength of the piece is its photographs and their presentation. A large number of these are of New York City in the period after September 11, but not of the event per se. Instead they capture something of the desolate, benumbed spirit of the City at that time. In one, you can see the barricades erected along Canal Street. Another shows mounted policemen, presumably at one of the subsequent anti-war demonstrations, but again, the rally itself is outside the frame, and instead what is communicated is a

generalized atmosphere of oppression and social volatility. Other photographs have nothing whatsoever to do with New York—one is an aerial view of a non-specified corporate type urban/suburban sprawl, another is of an intersection of wide flat streets in a more rural area.

All of these photographs are presented not in frames on the wall, but printed on newsprint in cheap tabloid form. They are bound and stacked along one of the walls of the gallery, something like the newspapers one sees outside newsstands in the early morning, and can be leafed through by viewers, even taken for free. This causes some positive confusion, since we are not used to being able to touch, let alone take the art in an exhibition.

The main weakness of the piece is the inclusion of text. Written as a cross between a manual for new immigrants and the stream-of-conscious monologue of such a person, it is mainly superfluous, which might be overlooked, if it weren't also extremely limited. The new immigrant's consciousness is an uncomprehending blank, punctured by voices from the outside, most of which seem to want to pick her up. She rides buses and plays her guitar, smokes cigarettes and has anonymous sex. The utter lack of reflection or emotion would seem to have little to do with the concerns of a new immigrant.

Nevertheless, the photographs and their presentation overcome this mistake in judgment, and make for a piece that at least hints at what art could communicate of the texture of life should it aspire to do so.



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