

Survey of contemporary art

The 2012 Whitney Biennial in New York City

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The Whitney Biennial in New York City continues to be one of the most prestigious survey exhibits of contemporary art, at a time when international biennials and triennials abound. The general consensus on this year's Biennial, curated by Elisabeth Sussman of the Whitney and Jay Sanders, an independent curator, is that it is far better than others in recent memory.

That said, is it just “better than,” or does it actually present a critical mass of aesthetically satisfying, or at least intriguing, art work with something to say about the world we live in?

Though hardly yet a majority, several of the works qualify as the latter, or at least strive in that direction: for instance, the photographs of Latoya Ruby Frazier, paintings by Jutta Koether and several of the films, notably *Putty Hill*, by Matthew Porterfield. In addition, the work of several figures from an earlier generation, like Werner Herzog and Forrest Bess, and a few lesser-known ones, such as Elaine Reichek, enriched the exhibit.

The fifty or so artists included by this year's curators (different each biennial) are meant to be representative of today's *zeitgeist*—the spirit of the times.

For the most part the artists included in the Biennial this year seem earnest rather than slick, relatively mature (many are in their 40s or older) and several employ the “old-fashioned” mediums of painting, printmaking, photography and sculpture in a straightforward manner.

However, work in a single medium rarely suffices in today's art world; artists must transfer techniques from one form to another on the basis of some conceptual rationale. Indeed, “this adroit switching between mediums gives much contemporary art its instant recognizability as contemporary art,” according to Terry Smith in *What is Contemporary Art?*

That contemporary art should be instantly recognizable by such essentially formal or even “organizational” means is a comment in itself on some of the current difficulties. It is questionable that such a criterion would have been used to identify any genuinely significant previous period in art history.

Although the curators in their notes on the Biennial decry the “flimsiness” of much of contemporary art, to this reviewer, too much of the selected work still falls into this category: work that is somewhat visually interesting, which is then elaborately presented in some kind of installation and further puffed with rhetoric about how the work “interrogates” aspects of our identity (ethnic or sexual) to comment

“politically” on our times.

This “interrogation” is generally itself never further “interrogated” for what it *actually has to say* about our times, or anything else. In the same manner, many self-indulgent, self-absorbed films at present are said to “meditate” on issues of identity, sexuality, appearance vs. reality, and so on, also generally to little effect.

(*Painting for All*) *The Seasons* by German artist Jutta Koether (b. 1958), for example, are large-scale, colorful oil paintings. Characterized by loose gestural patterns and a few figurative elements—one can make out a cat in *Winter* and a woman's breasts shaped like apples in *Spring*—they allude to the famous paintings by French Neoclassical painter Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665) on the same theme.

Koether's paintings are pleasant enough, but on their own merits might be considered a bit slight. So instead of being hung on the walls, the works are installed on free-standing glass panels so that you can see the wooden stretchers and linen back of the paintings (exposing the “materiality” of the work). Furthermore, the paintings are arranged in a square facing one of the trapezoid shaped windows “in a dialogue” with the Whitney Museum's signature architecture by Bauhaus modernist Marcel Breuer (1902-1991).

And if that weren't enough value added, their black zigzag lines are also supposed to comment on how we now measure the seasons by changes in fashion and the ups and downs of the stock market, though this would be hard to figure out without the wall text.

Several pieces at this year's Biennial either allude to or directly present the work of artists who died decades, if not centuries ago, effectively acknowledging that art in earlier cultural periods was capable of powerful expression without resort to such gimmicks.

Along these lines, the exhibition included a room of paintings by Forrest Bess (1911-1977), curated as a mini-show within the Biennial by the artist Robert Gober (b. 1954). Bess spent most of his life as a bait fisherman on the Gulf of Mexico, where in poverty and solitude, he painted his small-scale works, apparently based on visions. Their abstract, highly charged color shapes seem to attract and repel one another, at once in tune with the prevailing artistic trends of the 1940s, but also intensely individual.

For a time, Bess maintained a correspondence with gallery owner Betty Parsons in New York City, who showed his work along with that of Abstract Expressionists Jackson Pollock, Ellsworth Kelly, Mark Rothko, Robert Rauschenberg and others. The letters between Parsons and Bess (also on display), composed on manual typewriters, and signed “Love,” bespeak an art world no doubt still prone to competition and careerism, but a far cry from today's cutthroat professionalism.

Nevertheless, Bess was clearly not able to handle an art career. He most likely suffered from schizophrenia and developed a sexual theory of hermaphroditism that led him to perform life-threatening operations on himself, which he documented in drawings and photographs published in a medical journal (likewise on display in the gallery.) These hold a perverse fascination which, to this viewer at least, distracted from his art work, but presumably formed part of Gober's conceptual packaging of Bess for the Biennial.

Another work derived from the efforts of artists of a much earlier era is *Hearsay of the Soul*, from German film-maker and producer Werner Herzog. It is unclear why Herzog (b. 1942), a well-established figure in German and world cinema (*Aguirre the Wrath of God*, among other notable films), was invited to contribute to an exhibit supposedly showcasing the work of up-and-coming, American-born (or American-resident) artists. Perhaps it is because Herzog now lives in Los Angeles.

In any case, Herzog's video installation projects a series of exquisite woodcut prints by Dutch landscape artist Hercules Segers (1589-1630), a contemporary of Rembrandt (1606-1669), accompanied by a performance by Dutch cellist and composer Ernst Reijseger. The somewhat overwrought piece is nonetheless effective in communicating the arduous and ecstatic experience of artistic creation in a modern reprise of the early 19th century Romantic Movement's concept of the sublime.

Indeed, this pursuit of an aesthetic experience based on strong emotion, usually in conjunction with nature and unburdened by the specificity of any cultural or historical epoch—or at least not one's own—finds an affinity with aspects of the post-modernist outlook.

A good deal of the work presented at the Biennial was made up of performances and screenings that were hard to assimilate in their entirety, even on multiple visits. Several of these seemed to hold potential at least in terms of subject: Frederick Wiseman's *Boxing Gym*, Laura Poiras' *The Oath* and Mike Kelley's *Mobile Homestead*.

In the latter, the filmmaker, who sadly committed suicide shortly before the Biennial opened, drove a full-scale replica of the tract house in which he grew up, on a flat-bed truck down Michigan Avenue in Detroit. Though the concepts behind the piece are a bit murky, it certainly contained many striking images.

Other artists did address themselves to conditions to life today, particularly of working class life, primarily in photographs and films. Of note were the black and white photographs by Latoya Ruby Frazier (b. 1984) of Braddock, Pennsylvania, the former home of US Steel, where she grew up, and her family still lives.

Frazier's gritty images capture the derelict state of the so-called "Rust Belt" across the Northeast and Midwest of the United States. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, many cities and towns in this region, once the powerhouse of American capitalism, have been deindustrialized as the corporations, with the collusion of the unions, pursued greater profits on the basis of cheaper labor and globalized production.

The human consequences both in terms of health damage and poverty are expressed in Frazier's photographs of her grandparents, who've since died of exposure to toxins from the steel mills, and haunting images of Frazier herself in a derelict room, wearing her deceased grandfather's pajamas.

Frazier also photographed protests against the demolition of Braddock's only health facility, which was moved to a wealthier neighboring community, and juxtaposed these with the billboard ads for Levi's jeans that loom over abandoned downtown lots.

She comments on the falsity of the advertising campaign, with its soft-focus photographs of young "urban pioneers" posed with horses and under slogans such as "There's Work to be Done and Undone" or "Go Forth," by writing on the photographs, "*If there is work to be done, may the CEO's of both profit and non-profit corporations be Undone.*" Or *How can we Go Forth when the bus service has been cut? We don't have horses in Braddock!*"

Frazier's work, though compelling in an art world context in which the reality of contemporary life is often entirely absent, nevertheless remains largely on the surface. One hopes that as the working class engages more directly in political struggles in places such as Braddock, the photographer's sense of what the population is capable of will deepen and she will be able to go beyond the various forms of protest politics to which she seems susceptible.

Some of the same strengths and weaknesses characterize *Putty Hill* (2011), the second feature film by Matthew Porterfield (b. 1977), which carefully observes the lives of a group of working class kids in a semi-documentary fashion, as they gather for the funeral of one of their friends, dead from a drug overdose.

Porterfield himself grew up in Putty Hill, a Baltimore suburb he describes as "wild with unkempt hedges, disheveled lawns and porches, yards full of car parts and swimming pools, and a church or a bar on every corner." He studied film at New York University's Tisch School and lived on poorly paid teaching jobs until his films *Hamilton* (2006) and now this one began attracting notice and prizes.

He admires the films of Robert Bresson, Ken Loach and others who often use non-professional actors and minimal dialogue to create intimate character portrayals. "I try to rely a lot on my own intuition, on what I think about the frame. It's better maybe not to be too dogmatic about the things you'd like to see." Unfortunately, as a result, Porterfield's film has little enduring to say, dogmatic or otherwise, beyond the surface of the quite beautiful frames.

In any event, the hangover from decades in which this kind of impressionism and passivity in the face of reality prevailed seems to be wearing off, as reflected at the Whitney Biennial this year. The fact that a younger generation of artists is beginning, albeit timidly, to consider its work to have social overtones beyond the hackneyed clichés of identity politics, and to reflect instead on conditions of economic crisis and social inequality is a good sign, if not yet adequately realized. It can only presage more substantial work to come.



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