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At the Whitney, the Art Is Moving

Experimental films and fleeting live performances are at the forefront of this year's Biennial

By Ellen Gamerman
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A child mannequin heaves its robotic chest while a voice-over intones, "Is this death?" A performer in a horse mask appears in a dance. A projection displays a giant housefly.

The Whitney Biennial, one of the art world's most high-profile showcases, strives to explore the strange and inventive. The contemporary art survey – a mix of performance, film, photography, sculpture, painting and other work – runs through May 27 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

The exhibition features 51 artists, the smallest number in the event's history. It's designed to allow more breathing room between galleries and afford audiences a deeper look at individual artists. Some performances will rotate, and some work will be fleeting, created live before viewers.

Cinema is at the forefront this year, with timed screenings of features and experimental shorts. Nearly an entire floor is a stage for music, dance and theater, with a see-through dressing room that reveals behind-the-scenes action. Here is a look at some exhibition highlights.

DAWN KASPER

The Los Angeles artist has moved nearly everything she owns into the Whitney for the three-month exhibition, turning a gallery into her studio – what the museum calls a "living sculpture." The overstuffed room is strewn with personal effects as well as her art, like a warped tennis racket spinning on a motor and a photograph of her carving a geometric tattoo into her leg in a performance.

The 35-year-old artist, who won't sleep at the gallery, will spend five days a week talking with museum visitors, performing music and creating other works. She came up with the idea a few years ago: After finishing a job as an assistant to Mr. Kelley, she went on unemployment and lost her studio. She felt unmoored, she said, "as if I wasn't taken seriously if I didn't have a studio." She takes some time off from the exhibition at an apartment in Brooklyn. "I've been told by a spiritual healer that I need at least one hour by myself," she said.