



Whitney's 2012 Biennial Exhibit Parts With The Past

by Karen Michel

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Every two years, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City weighs in on what matters in the art world by mounting an exhibition that lays claim to showing the best, brightest and hippest that contemporary art has to offer. This Whitney Biennial, the 76th in the museum's history, is no exception, though it's different in several respects from its predecessors. There are fewer artists, nothing will be shown off site, and all disciplines will intermingle all the time. And this year, performance is big.

Each of the museum's five floors bustle with activity, yet there's an odd stillness. The frenzy that marked earlier biennials is missing. The mood is set when the doors open on a brown-clad woman sitting on the floor, unmoving, wearing a horse head. This is the performance floor, though performances are mixed in with everything else throughout the museum. Adam Weinberg, the Whitney's director, says that's part of what makes this biennial different from others.

"We do have to recognize that the Whitney Museum is primarily in its DNA a visual arts institution," says Weinberg. "It does become a challenge. Because they come to us and they expect to see painting and sculpture and photography and prints and drawings. We're not turning our back on that at all, I mean, it's part of the show and it will be ongoing."

A person-less performance captivated more than a dozen viewers, who sat hunched, listening to a player piano. It isn't some tricked-out instrument; it's just a brown upright with a slotted scroll.

"The song is originally by LCD Soundsystem," says Lucy Raven, who collaborated with pianist and composer Jason Moran to make three variations of the song "Dance Yrself Clean." Raven says the piece is a commentary on the encroachment of a computer-centric society.

"The player piano operates on this really early form of binary code," the artist says. "So I wanted to pick a song that could talk about some of those ideas and almost be an elegy, which 'Dance Yrself Clean' in a lot of ways is – a song about things of the past."

Photographs of the past – specifically, of the 1930s Works Progress Administration – inspired 30-year-old La Toya Ruby Frazier. Frazier's black-and-white images document the decline of her industrial hometown, Braddock, Pa. One photograph shows an older woman on the sidewalk, with a hospital behind her. The woman is Frazier's grandmother. The hospital has since been torn down.

"My grandmother died because of the illnesses she contracted from the steel mills and living in that environment," says Frazier. "My mother was in and out of that hospital her whole life. In fact, when they decided to close and started tearing it down, at that time she was having a lot of these neurological issues and seizures. And she collapsed right here on Fourth Street and Braddock Avenue, and there was no emergency care."



Dawn Kasper's nomadic studio, THIS COULD BE SOMETHING IF I LET IT, is a three-month performance and multimedia installation she inhabits for seven hours a day.

"This is my home and my studio for the time being," she says. "I take naps, but I can't sleep overnight."

Sheldan Collins/Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art

A New York Times preview of the show said, "Of course it wouldn't be a Whitney biennial without at least one outlandish installation. This year it's by Dawn Kasper."

"This is my home and my studio for the time being," says Kasper, giving a tour of the installation she inhabits seven hours a day. "I take naps, but I can't sleep overnight."

Kasper is here seven hours a day. Her space is like a movie set. There's no fourth wall, so you peer in, a voyeur, or go right in among the boxes, the art supplies, the art books and the TV playing old movies that are Kasper's inspiration.

Unlike Kasper's space, this biennial seems remarkably uncluttered. Even though performances are everywhere, there's plenty of painting and sculpture to see between the moving parts, says museum director Adam Weinberg.

"I don't imagine there'll be a time when there will be no visual elements to see within the museum," Weinberg speculates. "But you never know!"