

The New York Times

A Survey of a Different Color 2012 Whitney Biennial

by Roberta Smith
March 1, 2012

One of the best Whitney Biennials in recent memory may or may not contain a lot more outstanding art than its predecessors, but that's not the point. The 2012 incarnation is a new and exhilarating species of exhibition, an emerging curatorial life form, at least for New York.

Possessed of a remarkable clarity of vision, a striking spatial intelligence and a generous stylistic inclusiveness, it places on an equal footing art objects and time-based art – not just video and performance art but music, dance, theater, film – and does so on a scale and with a degree of aplomb we have not seen before in this town. In a way that is at once superbly ordered and open-ended, densely structured and, upon first encounter, deceptively unassuming, the exhibition manages both to reinvent the signature show of the Whitney Museum of American Art and to offer a bit of redemption for the out-of-control, money-saturated art world.

Largely avoiding both usual suspects and blue-chip galleries, this Biennial tacitly separates art objects from the market and moves them closer to where they come from, artists, whose creative processes and passion for other artists' work are among the show's unstated yet evident themes, along with documentary, color, collage, sexual identity and abstraction. It is a show in continual flux, and will to some extent be different each time you visit, right up to its final day. Multiple visits are warranted, in fact necessary, to get a true sense of this show's richness and the improvisatory energy it brings to the Whitney.

The Biennial has been organized by Elisabeth Sussman, the Whitney's curator of photography, and Jay Sanders, a writer, independent curator and former art gallery director known for his erudition in areas of poetry and performance. They have worked in tandem with Thomas Beard and Ed Halter, of Light Industry, a film-and-electronic-art space in Brooklyn, who guided the exhibition's ambitious film and video program. From what I had time to preview, the film selections include at least two of the show's major works: Frederick Wiseman's 2010 excursion into unnarrated documentary, "Boxing Gym," and Thom Andersen's three-hour "Los Angeles Plays Itself," a meditation on the discrepancy between movies and real life in largely architectural terms that is as enthralling as it is dispiriting.

Another filmmaker who stands out is Werner Herzog, who contributes "Hearsay of the Soul," a ravishing five-screen digital projection, to his first-ever art show. An unexpected celebration of the handmade by the technological – and a kind of collage – it combines greatly magnified close-ups of the voluptuous landscape etchings of the Dutch artist Hercules Segers (1589-1638), whom Herzog considers "the father of modernity in art," with some justification. The shifting scroll-like play of images is set to sonorous music, primarily by the Dutch cellist and composer Ernst Reijseger, who also appears briefly on screen, playing his heart out. I dare you not to cry.

The curators both signal and facilitate the show's new equality of objects and events by their ingenious decision to use the museum's vaulting fourth floor gallery, with its big Cyclopsian window overlooking Madison Avenue, for performing-arts events. In so doing they also remove from contention a space that in past Biennials has tended to encourage big, show-stopping, sometimes bombastic, implicitly macho art objects. (As for the art objects they do include, these tend to be works of modest scale, which they have arranged on the second and third floors in spare, open-plan displays that are almost startling in their avoidance of the usual Biennial overcrowding.)

With its putative center stage used simply, if grandly, as that – a stage that will pass from artist to artist – the Biennial defuses itself a bit, in a good way. The first occupant is the innovative New York-based British choreographer Sarah Michelson, whose work combines aspects of performance, installation and dance. Her set, which involves a floor painted with a giant enlargement of the architectural blueprints for the Whitney building and a big green neon portrait of herself, is one of the Biennial's most wonderful moments, albeit only until March 11. After that the choreographer Michael Clark, another Briton based in New York, will reconfigure the space and, working with a combination of trained and untrained dancers, will conduct two weeks of open rehearsals followed by two weeks of performances.

There are also performances in the second- and third-floor galleries, where more traditional artworks are in the majority. Georgia Sagri, who seems to specialize in antic Dada-flavored spoken-word art, will give 16 performances in her installation on the fifth-floor mezzanine. On the third floor Dawn Kasper, whose sensibility tends more toward Beat, has filled a gallery with most of her belongings, including a bed, stacks of books, numerous small appliances, artworks and art supplies. She will be on hand for the run of the show, working, visiting with the public, playing music or perhaps taking a nap. The work is titled "This Could Be Something if I Let It." I look forward to the exit interview.

This is a deeply artist-friendly show that revels almost tenderly in the various processes – personal, social, visual, physical, historical, political – that culminate in works of art, whether objects or art events. It repeatedly equates the curatorial with the artistic, in part by inviting participating artists to organize mini-shows or mini-festivals of film or music within the exhibition.

One such venture is a display, organized by the artist Robert Gober in a gallery on the museum's second floor, of the small, visionary semi-abstract canvases of Forrest Bess (1911-77), a Texas fisherman who lived on the Gulf Coast, painted motifs that came to him in dreams and tried to bring out the woman in himself by acts of self-surgery that turned him into a quasi-hermaphrodite. Bess wanted to exhibit documentation of his surgeries beside his paintings, but his New York dealer and frequent correspondent, the legendary advocate of the Abstract Expressionists Betty Parsons, declined. His wish comes true here, and the artist-dealer friendship, so basic to much new art, is folded into the show.

Bess's paintings, like Mr. Herzog's and Mr. Wiseman's contributions, are among the show's touchstones. Bess's compressed, evocative forms find echo in Vincent Fecteau's small voluminous painted sculptures, which start in the vicinity of Ken Price, John Chamberlain and Frank Gehry and achieve a convoluted density all their own. They look great in the company of the bright metamorphosing geometries that inhabit the small canvases of Andrew Masullo (who, as it happens, owns two of the Bess paintings on view).

Meanwhile something of Bess's proto-body art echoes in a video installation by Wu Tsang, whose work is also a standout in the New Museum's current triennial. Here his effort is a video installation that takes the form of a green room to be used by performers on the fourth floor. When it's not in use for that purpose the videos take visitors on a tour of the Silver Platter, a Latino Los Angeles nightclub frequented by transvestites, serving up a heady combination of lush atmosphere, personal confession and social criticism.

Numerous artists partake of more than one medium. On video Joanna Malinowska turns a famous Joseph Beuys performance into an American-Indian ritual and translates Duchamp's bottle rack into a tepee-sized amalgam of fake bison tusks that is the show's largest sculpture.

The short films of the underappreciated underground filmmaker Luther Price – one of the Biennial's stars – are part of the film program. But in one of the third-floor galleries Mr. Price also contributes some of the show's best pictorial art: projections of his lavishly scarified slides, pieced together from found film, filigreed with mold, textured with dust.

In these entrancingly delicate, implicitly violent works, life, chance, obsessive art making and an intense artistic psyche descended from Pollock, Rauschenberg and Jack Smith – if not Hercules Segers – flashes before your eyes. Mr. Price's fleeting images engage in a lively dialogue with their neighbors: the similarly shape-shifting images in a suite of 44 monotypes and one terrific painting by Nicole Eisenman; the shimmering, iridescent abstract installations – one vertical, one horizontal – of Kate Levant and Sam Lewitt.

In liking this show a lot I'm not saying that it is perfect, or that I like all of it. It could use a higher percentage of strong art objects and in this regard suffers from a lack of hard, open-eyed looking. It is, after all, a Whitney Biennial. It has irritating moments of preciousness and blank spots where it dwindles off into inconsequentiality. But at this juncture such faults seem preferable to overweening, overproduced machismo. And often what appears slight will gain strength if you return and look again, more closely.

In addition artists can gain substance as they change contexts. One of the show's youngest participants is a 28-year-old sculptor named Cameron Crawford, whose constructions on the third floor feel a tad Post-Minimally derivative. Yet Mr. Crawford makes a memorable impression in the show's catalog, where each artist has been given several pages to use in any way: write a work, invite others to write, reproduce photographs or graphics. He republishes a piece of his own writing, a fascinating kind of prose-poetry called "Elegance Is Refusal." If his sculpture ever rises to the level of his words, he will have done something.

With various time-based art works waiting in the wings – films by Mike Kelley and George Kuchar, a theater work by Richard Maxwell, a multimedia performance by Charles Atlas – this exhibition is an unfolding, in many ways uncontainable celebration. Catch as much as you can.