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Eye of the Beholder

by Ralph Gardner Jr.
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Knocking contemporary art is easy and sometimes even fun to do. But in the process you may be betraying your own ignorance, as my daughter, an art-history major, has accused me of doing in the past. It's my parochial ways under threat, bristling at the shock of the new. I may be missing the brilliance and even beauty that lurks beneath the kitschy and occasionally repulsive surface.

Thus, when I visited the Whitney Biennial last week I vowed to keep an open mind. To be less critic—for which I'm eminently unqualified, in any case—and more conduit; a vessel, or rather one of those drain strainers that allows liquids to pass through but that captures solid material before it can clog your pipes.

I was fortunate to exit the elevator on the museum's fifth floor just as a tour guide and her group had stopped in front of Fred Wilson's "Guarded View." It consists of four mannequins sporting the uniforms of the Jewish, Whitney, Metropolitan museums and the Museum of Modern Art. I liked it immediately, perhaps because I felt I understood it, I "got" it. Or rather there wasn't that much to get.

But then I overheard the docent ask, "What does it mean? It's not the art; it's the idea behind it." I heard her add something about gender. I assumed the mannequins were all guys because they were wearing ties and had broad shoulders. Was I already jumping to prejudiced, patriarchal conclusions? "What are the hierarchies?" she went on. "What does the acquisition of an object entitle a museum to do?"



Here's the good news: I didn't have to come up with answers, not just because I wasn't part of their tour group, but also because "Guarded View" isn't even in the Biennial, as it turns out. It's part of the museum's permanent collection. The mix-up was because a security guard in the lobby, an actual one, told me the Biennial, which runs through May 27, started on the fifth floor. It did, but towards the rear, on a mezzanine, down a flight of stairs.

That's where I encountered "Portal," a work by the psychedelic rock band the Red Krayola. I'd never heard of them before. Then again, when the band formed in 1966 I wasn't into psychedelics; I was attending Leonard Bernstein's "Young People's Concerts."

A wall plaque explained that the 2012 Biennial marked the band's first installation, where band members would chat live with museumgoers via Skype. Indeed, one of them, a white-haired man in a black T-shirt, happened to be on the screen at that moment.

I resist art that invites ticket holders to participate, to become part of the installation, as it were. I suppose because I'm self-conscious, especially in front of your average contemporary-art crowd. I'm afraid of doing something that will reveal I'm not in on the joke, like when a mime follows you down the street.

Nonetheless, I felt bad for the guy on the monitor. He just sat there, staring off into space. Visitors were milling about, but nobody was giving him the time of day. So I did. I asked him where he was. For all I knew he was downstairs in "Untitled," the new Danny Meyer restaurant in the basement of the Whitney.

"I'm in a Hollywood studio," he told me, encouraging me to move closer to the microphone on the monitor.

What was I supposed to say next? "How's 'Keeping the spirit of resistance alive' going?" Because the wall plaque said that's long been one of the Red Krayola hallmarks.

I didn't especially want to get into a conversation. But fortunately, I'd broken the ice. As soon as I moved aside, another visitor stepped forward and told the gentleman on the screen—I never got his name but he may have been band co-founder Mayo Thompson—that he was from Oakland.

"How's New York treating you?" the artist asked amiably.

"I love it," the museumgoer said. "I haven't been here since 1971."

My work done, I headed down to the third floor. There, I encountered Sam Lewitt's work "Fluid Employment" and a bunch of folks seated around it on small stools. I don't know if every day is like this at the Whitney or whether I just happened to visit on the museum equivalent of matinee day. But many on the tours seemed to be people of a certain age who silently took notes as their guides explained the art.

I could see how "Fluid Employment:" might benefit from some explaining. It appeared to consist of several tarps on which something the color and the viscosity of motor oil had been spread. Except that it wasn't Valvoline but ferrofluid, a magnetic substance created by NASA in the '60s. According to the tour guide, it's currently being used to coat stealth bombers. Since it's magnetic, if you toss a few magnets around, the fluid will be attracted to them, creating clumps that look like undulating undersea life caught in an oil spill.

I liked it, even though I'm not sure what the artist was trying to say. Maybe that's my problem. Perhaps it's unnecessary to seek meaning. I should just experience the object or installation as is. Don't let my intellectual insecurity stand in the way of a good time.

Having said that I'd like to propose a rule for all future contemporary -art exhibitions: no more projections, videos, slide shows, home movies, etc. Especially those featuring an appearance by the artist where he bears more than a passing resemblance to Christ. If I want to watch a video I'll go to YouTube.

Perhaps that's why I so enjoyed Elaine Reichek's work. It was a series of beautifully embroidered linens that looked like old-fashioned samplers, their subject matter things like spirals and labyrinths, apparently inspired by Greek myth. I'd be proud to hang one on my own wall. I can't say the same for ferrofluid.

My final stop was Dawn Kasper's installation where, once again, I was plunged into darkness, metaphorically speaking. It appeared to be a hoarder's studio apartment filled with things such as old LPs, a turntable, a tennis racket and a drum. And in the middle of it all stood Ms. Kasper herself.

As it turned out, I wasn't far off. The work is titled "Nomadic Studio Practice Experiment," and the wall plaque explained that Ms. Kasper hasn't had a studio since 2008. When invited to participate in a show, she uses the space as her studio. I thought of all the struggling artists out there wondering, "Why hadn't I thought of that?"

I suppose I should have buttonholed her—how often do you get the opportunity to interact with the artist in person (not withstanding the guy upstairs on Skype). But she was chatting with friends, amid all her stuff, and I felt I'd be intruding.