REPORT FROM NEW YORK
The Well-Tempered Biennial

Leaving behind the controversies that dogged previous editions, the 2004 Whitney Biennial placed painting at the heart of a national roundup that stressed individual expression over critical issues.

BY ELEANOR HEARTNEY

It has been over a decade since the infamous 1998 “political” Whitney Biennial. Curated by Elisabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, John Hanhardt and Lisa Phillips, it attracted bilious criticism for its strident and supposedly single-minded obsession with the world’s ills. Artists such as Sue Williams, Fred Wilson and Daniel Martinez took on racism, sexism and class conflict. One of the most controversial elements was the inclusion of the harrowing camcorder tape of the Rodney King beating. That exhibition has been largely forgotten, overshadowed by the 1998 “political” Whitney Biennial. Curated by Kim Fisher, painterly meltings of abstraction seemed to have been a reaction against the genre specialization and disciplinary boundaries that were in the air, and the kind of social and civil freedoms now under threat were the battle cries of a new generation.

However, with this biennial, there seemed to have been a reaction against the genre-defying, discipline-deconstructing 2002 biennial, about which Roberta Smith remarked in the 

The response to this year’s edition was surprisingly positive for a show generally considered to be the exhibition that critics love to hate. Michael Kimmelman, in the New York Times, called it “easily the best in some time” while the New Yorker’s Peter Schjeldahl deemed it “startlingly good” and “better... than anyone ... could have expected.” Such rave reviews translated into “good” and “better... than anyone ... could have expected.” Such rave reviews translated into good attendance figures, with lines wrapping around the block. One can’t help wondering if the lovefest was in part the response of an art community weary of strife. But beyond that, it also seemed to have been a reaction against the genre-defying, discipline-deconstructing 2002 biennial, about which Roberta Smith remarked in the Times; “This show often defines art so broadly, and so laxly, that the art all but disappears.”

But despite overt avoidance of politics, the unsettled mood of the nation nevertheless bubbled up in works evincing undercurrents of anxiety and apocalyptic thinking.

The curators, Chrissie Iles, Shamim Momin and Debra Singer, identify the show’s several leitmots in the catalogue. One is a cross-generational dissonance with the ’60s and ’70s, an era when revolution of all sorts was in the air, and the kind of social and civil freedoms now under threat were the battle cries of a new generation. However, the 21st-century version of this rebellion takes a more introspective and individualized form, seeking change in the mental rather than the political landscape.

Another recurring theme is a resignation about belonging to what Momin calls a “post-everything” world—a feeling that manifests itself both in a dandified skepticism toward any expression of commitment and an embrace of fantasy and personal flight. A word that recurs throughout the huge, overproduced catalogue is “utopia,” but it is mentioned almost wistfully, more an unattainable dream than a blueprint for a better future.

The overall mission seemed to be not so much the simple reinstatement of painting and drawing as a demonstration of the myriad ways these mediums are currently being employed to create private worlds that are only partially accessible to the viewer. Engaging a melange of references that include Japanese woodblocks, Persian miniatures and children’s book illustrations, Amy Cutler’s paintings create a strangely unsettling universe in which boundaries between the viewer and the viewer are hazy and not always clear. The figures in Velázquez’s Las Meninas assume the familiar poses.

Even some of the works in other mediums were about painting. One of the most striking was the late Stan Brakhage’s cinematic succession of Abstract-Expressionist compositions painted directly on the film stock. Turning to a different painting tradition, Eve Sussman’s video, 89 Seconds at Alcazar, allows the figures in Velázquez’s Las Meninas to assume and then depart from their familiar poses.

But the overall mission seemed to be not so much the simple reinstatement of painting and drawing as a demonstration of the myriad ways these mediums are currently being employed to create private worlds that are only partially accessible to the viewer. Engaging a melange of references that include Japanese woodblocks, Persian miniatures and children’s book illustration, Amy Cutler’s paintings create a strangely unsettling universe in which boundaries between humans, animals and inanimate objects seem to have disappeared. In her works, women carry horses on their backs, busy themselves like beavers building dams, or morph into camping stews that included simulated wood patterns by the recently rediscovered Alex Hay, bombastic word paintings by Mel Bochner, chlorophyll-enhanced abstractions by Taryn Van Iran, prismatic geometry by Kim Fisher, painterly meilings of abstraction and representation by Amy Sillman and deliberately awkward portraits by Elizabeth Peyton.

Opposite, top left, Eve Sussman: 89 Seconds at Alcazar, 2003, video projection, 12-minute loop.

Top right, view of Spencer Finch’s Night Sky (over the Painted Desert, Arizona, Jan. 11, 2004), 2003, 80 lamps, 500 bulbs, 30 feet long.

Center left, Richard Prince (left to right): Pression Hollow, Canal Zone and Haight-Ashbury, all 2002, fiberglass, Bando, acrylic and wood.

Center right, Jim Hodges: a view from here, 2002, glass, 7 by 5 by 25 inches. The Brody Collection, Dallas.

Bottom left, Amy Cutler: Campsite, 2002, gouache on paper, 46% by 47% inches.

Bottom right, David Altmejd: Delicate Men in Positions of Power, 2003, mixed-medium installation, 10 by 20 by 8 feet.

Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

between innocence and irony, presenting a contemporary and weirdly unsettling riff on Edward Hicks’s Peaceable Kingdom. Zak Smith took on that most hermetic modern novel, Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow, providing a grid of complex, vaguely referential drawings that purport to offer a pictorial gloss on every page of the book.

Nor was this tendency toward interiority confined to painters. Similar signals were being sent by artists who work in other mediums. David Altmejd’s Delicate Men in Positions of Power is a strange Tiffany-style tomb for a decaying werewolf ornamented with shards of mirror, bejeweled garlands and sprouting crystals. A possible precedent for this work is Paul Thek’s legendary 1967 tomb sculpture, Death of a Hippie, which carried equally strange alchemical and mystical allusions. Also rife with obscure allusions was Katie Grinnan’s set of linked installations, which was dominated by a Iblieflike spill of photos, ropes, feathers, shells and other objects from the ceiling. It suggested a faux tree, surrounded by such elements as the standing figure of a “hubcap woman” fashioned from white hubcaps, one of which encircles her head like a plastic halo, various sinister lawn ornaments, and real-time videos of rain forests and butterflies. The whole seemed to be sending some kind of message about nature, religion, and the lurking presence of good and evil.

Such works inflect the mix of spiritualism, apocalyptic warning and frustrated utopianism that ran throughout the biennial. Sometimes it took the form of a rejection of modernist confidence in the future. This was the theme of Wade Guyton’s inkjet collages, in which Xs and diagonal lines, marks of cancellation, are laid over vintage-looking images of Constructivist art and modernist architecture. The anticipated triumph of order and geometry also came under fire in Julie Mehretu’s monumental renderings of exploding architectural drawings, which seem to be blasting the fragments of Utopian perfection back into the primordial chaos they were designed to subdue (See article beginning on p. 170).

But if modernism has proved a disappointment, the simple life fared no better in this show. The American heartland appeared in several works as a nostalgic fantasy gone wrong, Alec Soth’s “Sleeping by the Mississippi” is a series of color photographs taken during a trip down the legendary river. This mythic territory, once navigated by Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, hosts a journey to declining river towns, tiny evangelical churches, and seedy whorehouses populated by disturbed and disturbing characters. Katy Grannan’s photographs evoke a similar sense of sleazy voyeurism. In one, a pair of young women in crocheted lingerie lounge inexplicably on a rural road; in another a naked man sprawls beneath a tree, exposing his privates and his tattoos.

Found objects were used by some artists to express a sense of aborted Utopia. Mark Handforth transforms highway signs into sly symbols of the broken promise of freedom once embedded in American fantasies of the open road. A bent metal Texaco star and a crushed interstate-highway sign marked “No Exit” exude a doleful existentialism, while Handforth’s Western Sun is fashioned from a set of radiating yellow fluorescent lights arranged in a semicircle on the wall. Rob Fisher’s handmade Dumpster full of old sculptures, tied piles of newspapers, rusty machinery and oil drums also seemed a sad commentary on American excess. Meanwhile, visitors walking between floors were confronted with Juliane Swartz’s stairwell sound piece, in which a rendition of the escapist hymn “Over the Rainbow” was broadcast from an elaborate configuration of tubes and pipes.

Other artists, preoccupied with a search for meaning, turned to various forms of spiritual expression. Raymond Pettibon’s scrawled wall drawings and texts involved unresolved speculations about death, politics and God. In his work, zebras, roosters and other animals represent not the peaceable kingdom, but the “piecemeal kingdom,” while a drawing of a supernova prompts this philosophic question about the Creator—“How can we have projected onto him lights so dim and powers so unsteady?”

With this biennial, there was a certain sense of a Return to Order, in which traditional genres and disciplines regain ascendance. It was most evident in the central place given to painting.

Installation Theory and Observation, which juxtaposes visuals of a children’s choir in Paris’s cathedral of Notre Dame with electronic music and a recording of passages from Stephen Hawking’s A Brief History of Time. Hawking recounts how the pope worried about contradictions between the big bang theory and Catholic teachings on the origin of the universe. In the end, the tension between belief and science suggested here seemed resolved by shared awe at the wonders of the universe.

A thread of melancholic romanticism ran through much of the work on view. A large graphite drawing by Robyn O’Neil looks serenely austere at first glance, providing a sweeping panorama of fir trees and ice-skaters in a winter mountain landscape. The title, borrowed from Revelations, warns that everything that stands will be at odds with its neighbor, and everything that falls will perish without grace. That sentiment challenges the initial benign impression, as do little details—the bodies of flayed animals, fallen skaters and a massive dead tree in the center of the field—that seem to point to more apocalyptic doings.

Cecily Brown’s Black Painting 2 is a lushly painted female nude set below a stormy black cone filled with brushy black birds of prey. The contrast between the soft flesh below and the swirling turmoil above suggests the dark side of eroticism. This and its companion, Black Painting 4, are large, ambitious pieces with deliberate echoes of Goya, Fuseli and the Romantic tradition. At an opposite pole in terms of scale, birds recurred in Ernesto Caivano’s delicate, Beardsleyesque drawings. Here, however, they are splendid creatures who seem to represent supernatural forces caught up in some kind of cosmic battle.

In other works, nature appeared as a possible substitute for the meaning and authenticity that seem to have disappeared from the human realm. Spencer Finch re-created the constellations of an Arizona night sky with bulbs hanging together in Tinkertoy-like groupings. Jim Hodges contributed an exquisitely crafted glass sculpture of a bird’s nest and a lyrical painting of a tree whose leaves became cutouts fluttering into our space. The late Jack Goldstein was represented by a digitally manipulated video that mixes images of neon-hued fish, octopuses and other sea creatures amid roiling waves of volcanic lava and cascades of fire. The film ends on a slightly more placid note, with the shadow of an eclipse moving across the moon.

Robert Longo also located a sense of sublimity in the sea. He contributed several enormous charcoal drawings of oiling black waves erupting into glowing sprays of white. Craigie Horsfield’s El Hierro
Conversation is a four-screen video installation presenting eight hours of footage taken in the western Canary Islands. The video chronicles the islanders’ lives, their daily rituals and holiday celebrations, though each time I walked into the installation, the wall-size screens were presenting a vast near-emptiness of sky, sea and distant birds.

In such works, nature becomes a repository of longings for beauty, emotional exaltation and mystery. Other artists seemed to question such fetishization of nature. Yutaka Sone filled the first-floor annex gallery with a simulated jungle grown up around a pair of topographically accurate relief sculptures of the Los Angeles freeway, meticulously carved in pure white marble. Similarly ironic was Glen Kaino’s Desktop Operation, which presented a green sand fortress encased inside a Japanese garden. But instead of raking the surrounding sand to create abstract wave patterns in the traditional fashion, he inscribed the sand with military-, game- and sports-based notations of competition and conflict. Christian Holstad brought out the camp in gladiatorial contests with mind alteration. He created a disco-inspired installation complete with a drawing- and photo-collage-covered interior, music, throbbing lights and a spiral staircase to nowhere.

As the curators note, a great deal of the show returns to motifs and styles identified with the 1960s and ’70s. That bygone era was presented through the eyes of both those old enough to remember it firsthand and younger artists for whom it resonates principally as a somewhat tarnished golden age. In an amusing and informative video, BaadAsssss Cinema, Isaac Julien (b. 1960) explored the history and larger meanings of the blaxploitation films of the ’70s, Dave Muller (b. 1954) provided an expansive chart of the evolution and interrelationships of various rock bands. Richard Prince (b. 1949) fetishized the classic T-Bird car hood in a set of gray fiberglass sculptures. Andrea Zittel (b. 1965) invoked back-to-the-land fantasies with an experiment in rural living in her native California. A video presents her reconstruction of a 1930s house plus views of a set of dwellings built out of shipping containers that she scattered about the surrounding homestead. The video was viewed from a seating area that replicated the eccentric office furniture Zittel designed for the house. Fred Tomaselli (b. 1956) revived the drug-induced psychedelic trips of the ’60s with intricate collages of figures that seem to meld with a cosmic space.

It turns out that the search (pharmacological or otherwise) for expanded consciousness retains great appeal for members of the younger generation. In Reading Ossie Clark, Jeremy Blake (b. 1971) pays homage to a ’60s-era fashion designer whose height of fame occurred before the artist was born. The work is a video in which a mesmerizing succession of half-recognizable figural imagery and abstract patterns of light and color, at times overlaid with spiraling clouds of marijuana smoke, is accompanied by Clarissa Dalrymple’s reading of fragments from the designer’s 1960 diary that describe Clark’s adventures with controlled substances. The group (really one artist in a series of shifting collaborations) called “assume vivid astro focus” created a disco-inspired installation complete with a drawing- and photo-collage-covered interior, music, throbbing lights and a spiral staircase to nowhere.

Virgil Marti’s Grow Room also referenced ’60s experiments with mind alteration. He created a Mylar-covered room whose distorted reflections were interrupted by graphic images of flowers and inanimate spiderwebs imprinted on the silvery surfaces of the wall panels. A Venetian-style chandelier cast from deer antlers was suspended above. This work offered a rather pale update of Yayoi Kusama’s “Mirror Rooms,” which originated in the 1960s. A recent incarnation of that series, Fireflies on the Water, was on view here. Limited to one individual at a time, it encloses the viewer in a fractured, magical space in which tiny Christmas lights seem to multiply indefinitely in an apparently infinite space. (The presence of Kusama, an eminent Japanese artist who hasn’t lived in the U.S. since the early ’70s, was an unexplained departure from the American-only focus of the Whitney Biennial. Similarly, Julien and Luisa Roberts were neither born nor live in the U.S.)

Another aspect of the ’60s that seems to attract younger artists is the persona of the disaffected youth, who is given to puerile transgression, world-weary cynicism or romantic yearnings for death. Paul McCarthy, whom the curators point to as an important influence here, was represented by several public-art pieces, to be discussed presently. His younger acolytes included Sue de Beer, who invited viewers to sit down and watch her video in a simulated teen bedroom filled with large stuffed animals. Images on the screen, some of which seem to have been filmed in this very room, presented alienated adolescents having sex, playing air guitar, sitting bored in school, or indulging in existential or suicidal rants. Similar territory was mined by Aida Ruilova with a five-video installation in which looped sequences of apparently demented individu-
A valorization of the political consciousness of ‘60s youth culture was rare. Only a few artists seem to be grappling with real concerns engendered by events of the last years.
A mix of spiritualism, apocalyptic warning and frustrated utopianism ran throughout the biennial. Sometimes it took the form of a rejection of modernist confidence in the future.

Inflatable sculpture looming on the roof. Anchored in place with yellow ribbons, it was an enigmatic presence, full of strange orifices and half-recognizable organic shapes.

In the Doris Freedman Plaza at the southeast corner of Central Park, McCarthy installed a mutant version of Jeff Koons’s notorious ceramic sculpture of Michael Jackson and his monkey, Bubbles. (The original could be seen in a Koons show at C + M Arts, a few blocks north of the Whitney.) Here the figures were topped with huge black bullion forms that are only marginally headlike. Nearby, Liz Craft’s bronze sculpture of a prickly pear cactus was considerably more subdued than her death rider inside the museum. The other public offerings tended toward the playful and surreal, with hints of darker undercurrents beneath their carnivalesque air. Olav Westphalen’s bright yellow fiberglass tiger was slyly located near the zoo. The animal plays with two balls, which, a descriptive label informs us, correspond to standard zoo toys designed to simulate the weight of prey. David Altmejd’s pair of crystalline werewolf heads in Plexi cases were an unexpected presence on the green at the north end of the park.

Several works debuted in mid-April. David Maier’s ‘Three Day Weekend’ in the Arsenal Gallery off the zoo was a weekend-long art exhibition whose most successful element was a trampoline popular with young kids. In the same spirit, assume vivid astro focus painted bright patterns on the ground of the park’s roller-skating circle. Pulsing disco music emanated from a DJ station in the middle as skaters whirled by. Shipping problems delayed a Kusama installation scheduled for the conservatory pond. As a whole, the public-art projects were cheerful diversions from the angst evident elsewhere in the show.

What, if anything, did this most recent edition of the Whitney Biennial tell us about art or our times? Among its messages: painting is big, craftsmanship is in and young artists are looking back to their elders. But perhaps the reigning emotion was ambivalence. While the rhetoric of good and evil pervades the political dialogue in America, the artists here turn away from absolutes and make their comments on the world situation obliquely. The overt political commentary that pervaded Documenta 11 in 2002 was rarely visible. The result was a show with plenty of visual pleasures but an odd reluctance to address a world not of the artists’ making. It was hard to suppress the thought that apocalyptic intimations and escapist desires are hardly the most effective means with which to engage the very real dangers that currently threaten us.


Author: Eleanor Heartney is a freelance critic based in New York. Her most recent book is Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art (Midmarch Arts Press, 2004).