
2004
biennial

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 1993 "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 remains the most memorable Biennial in recent years, notable as much for the clarity of its position as for the firestorm it ignited. In summing up a tendency toward social engagement and identity politics much in evidence in the art of the early 1990s, it also, paradoxically, marked a sea change in the ever-shifting relationship of art and politics, sending an art world weary of social causes skittering off toward beauty.

This year, with the country evenly and bitterly divided on the domestic political front, and the target of furious and often murderous rage abroad, one might have expected some form of return to the fireworks of the 1993 edition. The 2004 biennial was the first to be fully conceived since the world changed on Sept. 11, 2001. (The previous one, which opened in March 2002, was largely selected before the disaster.) Yet, for the most part, the 2004 biennial scrupulously sidestepped direct social or political commentary for a focus on fantasy, nostalgia and escape. (In this it rather accurately reflected the contemporary work visible this season in galleries and museums, and in fact seemed far more dependent on those sources than has been the case with recent biennials.)

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),** *2004, 80 lamps, 400 bulbs, 30 feet long.*

Center left, Richard Prince (left to right): **Preston Hollow, Canal Zone** *and* **Haight-Ashbury,** *all 2003, fiberglass, Bondo, acrylic and wood.*

Center right, Jim Hodges: **a view from in here,** *2003, glass, 7 by 5½ by 25½ inches. The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas.*

Bottom left, Amy Cutler: **Campsite,** *2002, gouache on paper, 46½ by 47¾ 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.

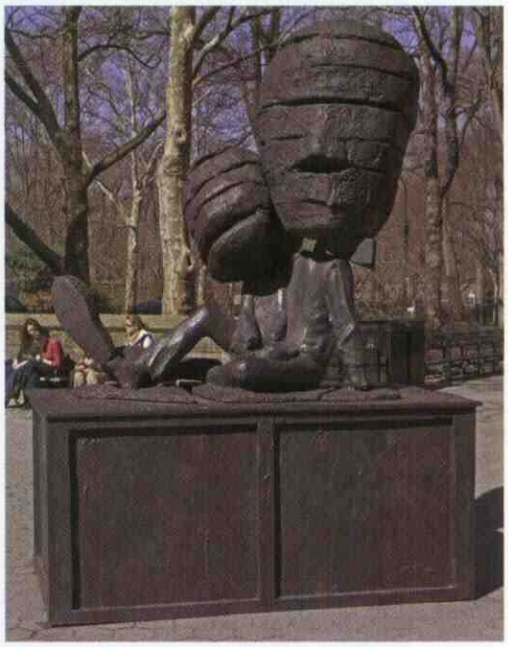
But despite overt avoidance of politics, the unsettled mood of the nation nevertheless bubbled up in works evincing undercurrents of anxiety and apocalyptic thinking.

The curators, Chrissie Iles, Shamim Momin and Debra Singer, identify the show's several leitmotivs in the catalogue. One is a cross-generational fascination 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 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 record 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."

Boundaries and definitions will never again be as firm as they were before the demolitions of postmodernism. However, with this biennial, there was a certain sense of a Return to Order, in which traditional genres and disciplines regain ascendance. This was most evident in the central place given to painting. Ranging from a set of blandly descriptive interiors and portraits by David Hockney to the surprisingly sinuous new vertical-format abstractions of Robert Mangold, painting here encompassed a generational and stylistic stew that included simulated wood patterns by the recently rediscovered Alex Hay, bombastic word paintings by Mel Bochner, chlorophyll-enhanced abstractions by Tam Van Tran, prismatic geometry by Kim Fisher, painterly meldings of abstraction and representation by Amy Sillman and deliberately awkward portraits by Elizabeth Peyton.



Paul McCarthy: **Michael Jackson, Big Head,** *2002, bronze, 10 by 8 by 4 feet; at Doris C. Freedman Plaza, Central Park. Private collection, New York. Courtesy Public Art Fund.*

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 mélange 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 tents and electric fans. Laura Owens was represented by a single monumental landscape painting centering around a nearly barren tree occupied by a population of endearing squirrels, birds, spiders and dogs. Set against a romantically turbulent night sky, the scene exists somewhere

Cecily Brown: **Black Painting 2**, *2002, oil on linen, 7½ by 6½ feet. Whitney Museum of American Art.*

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 foliagelike 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 reflect 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].

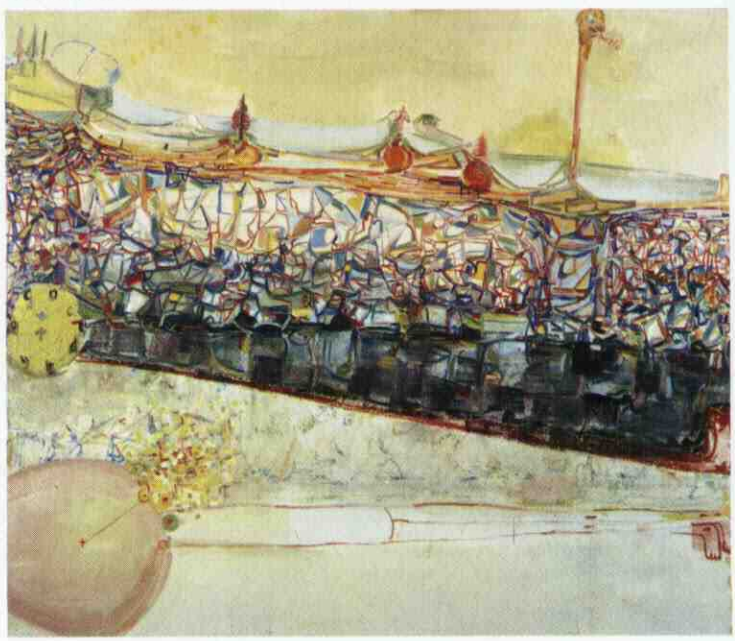
But if modernism has proved a disappointment, the simple life fared no better in this show. The American heartland appeared in several works as a nostalgic fantasy gone wrong. Alec Soth's "Sleeping by the Mississippi" is a series of color photographs taken during a trip down the legendary river. This 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 Julianne 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?"

Similar questions haunted Slater Bradley's video

Amy Sillman: **Hamlet**, *2002, oil on canvas, 6 by 7 feet. Whitney Museum of American Art.*



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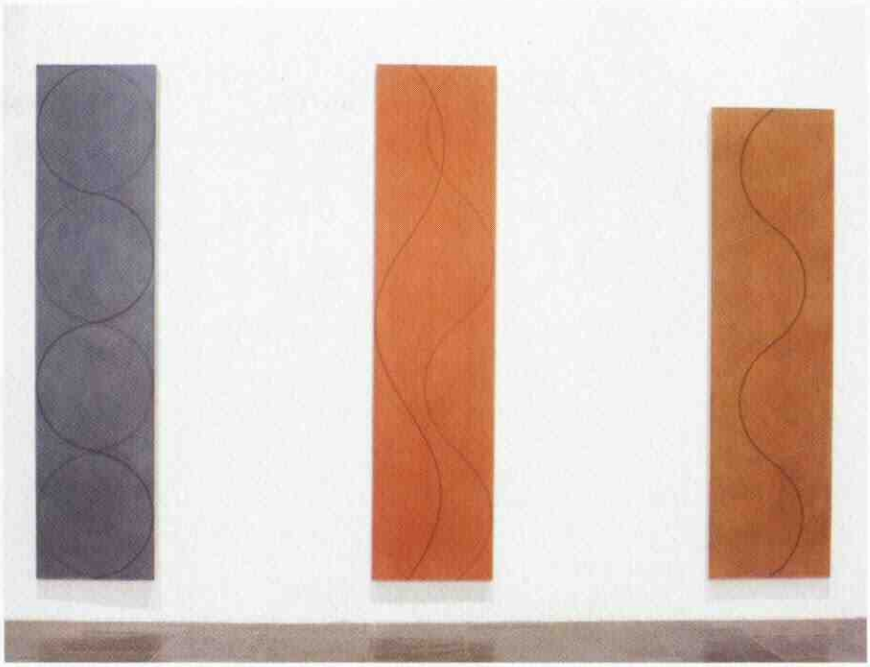
installation *Theory and Observation*, which juxtaposes visuals of a children's choir in Paris's cathedral of Notre Dame with electronic music and a recording of passages from Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*. Hawking recounts how the pope worried about contradictions between the big bang 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 zone 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, Füssli 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 coiling black waves erupting into glowing sprays of white. Craigie Horsfield's *El Hierro*



Robert Mangold (left to right): **Column Painting #2, *2002*, #6, *2003*, and #3, *2002*, all acrylic and graphite on canvas.**

***Laura Owens: Untitled, 2004*, oil and acrylic on linen, 11 by 9¼ feet. Photo courtesy GBE (Modern), New York.**

Marina Abramovic: **Count on Us,** ***2003, video installation, dimensions variable.***

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 campsite with sleeping bags fashioned from designer flower fabric arranged around leather campfire logs bursting into crocheted flames.

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. 1964) 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.

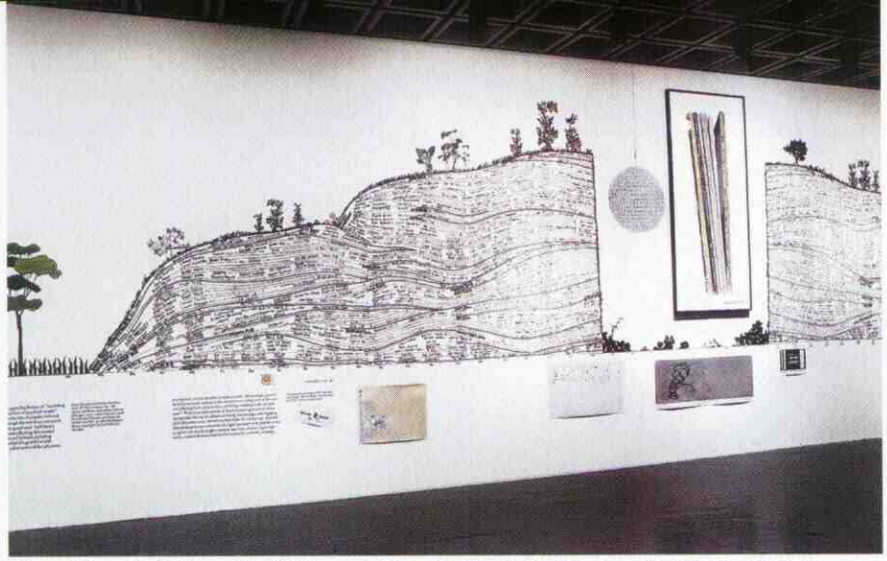
It turns out that the search (pharmacological or otherwise) for expanded consciousness retains great appeal for members of the younger generation. In *Reading Ossie Clark*, Jeremy Blake (b. 1971) pays homage to a '60s-era fashion designer whose height of fame occurred before the artist was born. The 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 1969 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 macramé 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 Liisa Roberts were neither born nor live in the U.S.)

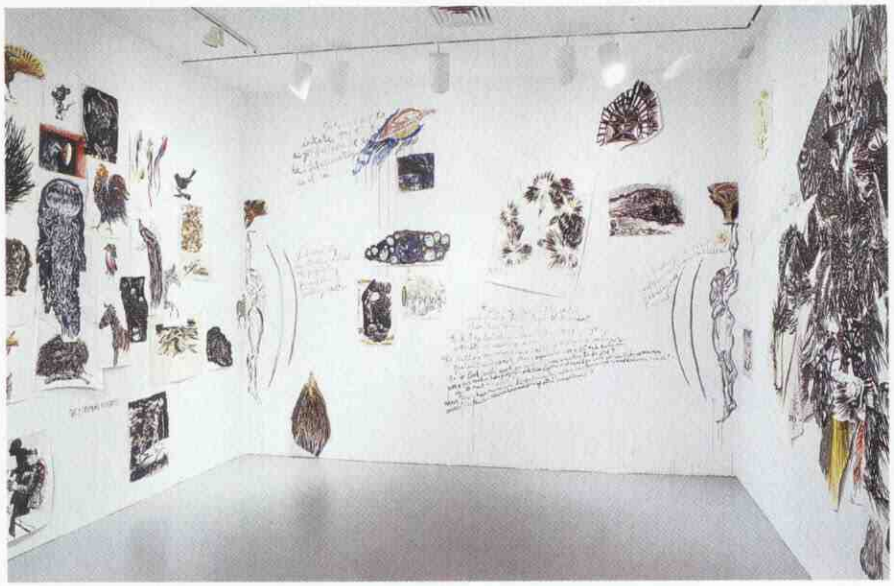
Another aspect of the '60s that seems to attract younger artists is the persona of the disaffected youth, who is given to puerile transgression, world-weary cynicism or romantic yearnings for death. Paul McCarthy, whom the curators point to as an important influence here, was represented by several public-art pieces, to be discussed presently. His younger acolytes include 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-

Liz Craft: **Death Rider (Virgo),** ***2002, bronze, 55 by 107 by 31 inches. Collection Dean Valentine and Amy Adelson.***

Catherine Sullivan: **Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land,** ***2003, five-channel video installation, 16mm film transferred to video.***



View of Dave Muller's . . . **That Hollywood Adage: Be Nice to the People on the Way Up, Because They're the Same People on the Way Down**, *2004, mixed-medium drawings, synthetic polymer on wall, dimensions variable.*



View of Raymond Pettibon's **Title on the Line**, *2004, ink on paper, dimensions variable.*

als enact strange and desperate actions to pulsing rock music.

The decadent sensibility resurfaces in Liz Craft's *Death Rider (Libra)*, a bandanna-festooned bronze skeleton on a souped-up low-rider motorcycle, and Tom Burr's *Black Out Bar*, an installation presenting a disheveled bar littered with half-filled glasses, cigarette butts and party debris. In a cheerfully dissolute touch, the bar and floor were draped with huge black vinyl cutouts based on the outlines of Andy Warhol's iconic flower paintings. Created in a similar spirit, Banks Violette's black and blasted-looking drum set commemorated the music and suicide of Kurt Cobain.

Much rarer here was a valorization of the political consciousness of '60s youth culture. Several works re-created documentary photographs of particular struggles, which had the effect of distancing and transforming those records of tumultuous events into harmless historical artifacts, mired in a sense of mourning for more socially conscious times. Sam Durant showed graphite drawings of photographs of student protests from the '60s, including a 1968 *Newsweek* cover of an antiwar rally. Andrea Bowers redrew fragments of photographs of '60s-era political activists—among them women infiltrating a nuclear site and protesters confined behind a chain-link fence. And Mary Kelly created a mural from a much-published shot of a young woman waving a flag during the May 1968 demonstrations in Paris. The photo is reconstructed out of clothes lint, a material Kelly has employed in other works, but this technique doesn't seem to add much to our understanding of the image.

Only a few artists seem to be grappling with real political concerns engendered by the horrendous events of the last few years. Emily Jacir, a Houston-born artist of Palestinian descent, was represented by her effective and widely exhibited *Where We Come From*, a set of photographs and texts documenting her efforts in the occupied territories to fulfill the wishes of Palestinians denied the freedom of movement she enjoys as the bearer of a U.S. passport. Catherine Sullivan's multiscreen video installation *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* was inspired by the 2002 attack on a Moscow theater by Chechen rebels. The video is a stylized, episodic

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reenactment of the interrupted play, a nationalistic celebration of the birth of Russian polar aviation. Stiffly moving actors assume militaristic postures and engage in absurdly schematic acts of violence. "Insurgents" periodically interrupt the production, though it is hard to tell the difference between the actors and the terrorists—a confusion that is, one suspects, the work's ultimate point.

In her room-filling video installation, Marina Abramovic plays the poetry of life against the death drive that seems to propel so much international policy. Five screens of different sizes placed around the room provide successive vignettes. One presents Abramovic costumed as a skeleton and conducting a children's chorus from her native Serbia that sings an English-subtitled paean to the United Nations. Composed in the 1980s, the song is now implicitly a sad commentary on the U.N.'s failure to stem the violence that engulfed the region in the '90s. Two smaller screens offer a boy and girl in school uniforms singing haunting Serbian songs; on yet another screen, the artist, in skeleton garb, lies on the ground and is overrun by the children of the chorus, who form a Communist star around her. The imagery of the fifth video associates the candle-bearing artist with the discoveries of the Serbian electrical engineer Nikola Tesla. Throughout, the mix of symbols and sounds is sweetly beautiful and apocalyptic.

Meanwhile, one of the most intriguing and category-defying bodies of works here, a series of sculptures by the young Texas artist Dario Robleto, touches in a poetic way on contemporary concerns. The sculptures incorporate evocative materials that retain their original associations even as they have been remade into beautifully crafted objects. For example, a small work with the elaborate title *At War With the Entropy of Nature/Ghosts Don't Always Want to Come Back* is apparently a mangled tape cassette. The wall label reports that it was created from every bone in the human body mixed with Trinitite, the glass produced by sand fused together in the blast from the first atomic test explosion at Trinity site in New Mexico. The label further notes that the no longer functional tape once carried battlefield sounds from American wars as channeled by psychics. Thus the cassette becomes the tiny repository of an epic statement about war, death and history.

For the second time, the Whitney collaborated with the Public Art Fund to place Biennial works at various locations in Central Park. Each of the artists outside was also represented within the museum, with the exception of Paul McCarthy, whose on-site contribution consisted of a huge

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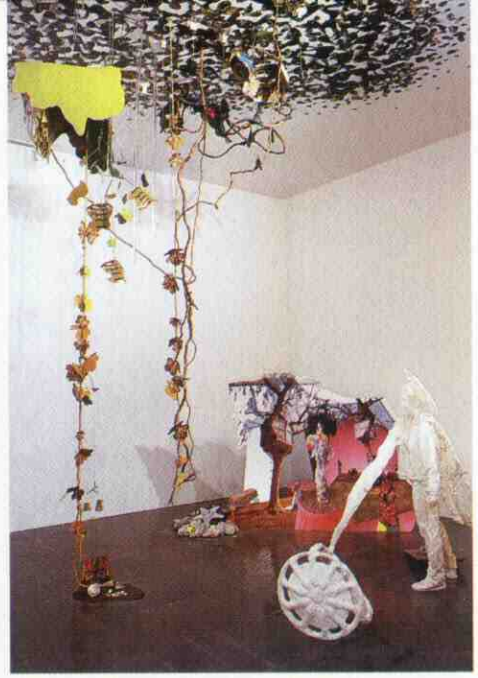
inflatable sculpture looming on the roof. Anchored in place with yellow ribbons, it was an enigmatic presence, full of strange orifices and half-recognizable organic shapes.

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 bulbous 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 Muller'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. □



Katie Grinnan (left to right):* Dreamcatcher, Midnight at Noon *and* Hubcap Woman, *all 2003, mixed mediums.

Dario Robleto:* At War with the Entropy of Nature/Ghosts Don't Always Want to Come Back, *2002, mixed mediums, 2½ by 3¾ by ¾ inches. Collection Julie Kinzelman and Christopher Tribble.

Andrea Zittel:* Prototype for Raw Desk #2, *2001, medium-density fiberboard, paint, polyurethane, fabric and mixed mediums, 2½ by 10½ by 10½ feet.

Glenn Kaino:* Desktop Operation: There's No Place Like Home (10th Example of Rapid Dominance: Em City), *2003, wood, paint, plastic tarp, sand, water and floodlight, 8 by 12 by 10 feet.

The Whitney Museum of American Art's 2004 Biennial exhibition was on view in New York, Mar. 11-May 30. It was accompanied by a two-part catalogue: a 272-page illustrated volume with essays and a box filled with an assortment of artists' multiples.

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