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Binary days at the Biennial

There are some fine works to see at the Whitney, New York's big, largely irrelevant show. And the tone is icy hot.

April 11, 2004 | Christopher Knight | Times Staff Writer

New York — For the 2004 edition of the Whitney Biennial, Los Angeles sculptor Paul McCarthy has placed a wicked version of a Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade float on the roof of the Madison Avenue museum building. Festive and foolish, both carnival attraction and serious work of art, the bronze-colored balloon makes an ideal emblem to represent the WB.

Its lumpy, funny-ugly form, tethered against the wind by bright yellow ropes, is said to be based on a sculpture McCarthy made as a child in imitation of the classic organic abstractions by Henry Moore. (Note Moore's trademark see-through hole in its gut.) The result, a bulbous female torso-in-bondage, is essentially a giant blowup doll -- party to a biennial ritual that contemporary American art cannot escape. The work transforms the Whitney's building into a grandiose pedestal for tangled erotic yearnings.

McCarthy's shrewd gesture is one of few in the show to consider the specific context for which it was made. The Whitney describes its biennial survey of the best in recent American art as the institution's trademark event; in truth, the WB languishes in near-irrelevance.

The show has mostly been a bust since the 1980s. The early consensus among East Coast critics reviewing the 2004 installment (it continues through May 30) has been a resounding "not as bad as usual!" Not much of a headline, but the sentiment is easily explained as a sigh of relief.

The Whitney has been AWOL from its former position as flagship for contemporary American art. (The long-term turmoil is signaled by a simple fact -- three directors in less than a decade.) Manhattan is the national center of art consumption, and the resulting vacuum has been exacerbated by four things: the closure (and temporary exile to Queens) of the mighty Museum of Modern Art while it is undergoing building expansion; fiscal chaos and program reduction at the highflying Guggenheim Museum; the disastrous reception given the 2002 Biennial, the worst in memory; and finally, the slow lifting of deep psychic and emotional trauma after Sept. 11. The local yen to embrace the 2004 Biennial is strong.

And the early consensus is not wrong. The WB is, in fact, "not as bad as usual." Art overall is in pretty good shape these days. Tons of bad stuff is around (as always), but given the immense American art world it isn't difficult to fill 40,000 square feet of galleries with reasonably good material. Whitney curators Chrissie Iles, Shamim M. Momin and Debra Singer chose 108 artists and collaborative groups. About one-quarter of their picks intersect with my own taste.

The single most compelling work is the big enchanted landscape painting by Laura Owens. Eleven feet tall, it features her patented merger of mysterious motifs from Chinese Song dynasty scrolls, 1970s pattern painting, children's book illustration, high Modernist abstraction, folk art and more. Owens cobbles together a moody, pluralistic vista that values aesthetic imagination above all else.

Ambiguous and playful, it also benefits from a smart move. Playing against type -- or maybe against hype -- she contributed just one work to art's biggest, blowziest show. Heroic grandiosity tends to cling to our ideas of ambitious art like bubble gum to a shoe, but it's not her style. Owens gives a lot in this single work, then leaves you wanting more.

Emphasis on painting

There's a lot of painting (nearly one-fifth of the exhibition), which is far more than is customary. Unfortunately, mediocrity rules. Even gifted stalwarts such as Robert Mangold are represented by unexceptional examples -- bland canvases of curved lines -- or, in the case of Conceptual artist Mel Bochner, canvases of quaint linguistic signs (cheerfully colored lists of nasty or nonsensical words).

On the plus side, intimate renderings of people by fashionable young New York painter Elizabeth Peyton use chalk, oil and colored pencil to make love to photographic reproductions. They're cleverly paired with David Hockney's refreshingly simple watercolor portraits and studio views, which use paint to make love to the activity of seeing. But the curators missed an opportunity for further intergenerational elucidation -- Hockney is 66, Peyton is 38 -- by not including the even younger L.A. painter Brian Calvin, 34, whose melancholic work successfully elaborates themes from Hockney's classic 1960s paintings.

The sliced abstractions of paper, vellum, tape and paint by Lecia Dole-Recio are strong, establishing deep physical space without benefit of traditional illusionistic devices. Cecily Brown's wonderfully lascivious nudes are pressed beneath forbidding black clouds filled with fluttering penis shapes. Incoherent chaos and excruciating control are balanced on a metaphorical knife-edge by the explosive linearity of Julie Mehretu's monumental "Rise of the New Suprematists."

There are a couple more. The WB's emphasis on painting does reflect the medium's current importance, but the weakness of the selection overall made me blanch. Artists haven't forgotten how to make first-rate paintings (they never stopped, whether or not critical fashion looked their way), which means curators -- perhaps bleary from decades of video, photography and text works -- may have forgotten how to look at painting.

If so, yikes.

Chromatically, the show seems dominated by silver, misty white and opalescent grey (as opposed to the less-chic gray), with black used as an accent color. The

WB's tone is icy hot, like a Hugo Boss store or a Mercedes dealership -- or, for that matter, like Yoshio Taniguchi's design for MoMA's gigantic new building.

Interchangeable choices

A couple good things: The show's installation presents a relatively discrete series of rooms, each featuring one or several artists on whom it's possible to focus. Internet art -- so far, pretty much the Xerox art of the 21st century -- is relegated to the margins.

Speaking of installation, the genre that goes by that name looks especially thin. An exception: Eric Wesley gets away with a big, witty, ragtag environment jerry-built from plywood, insulating foam, wallboard and fluorescent light, wryly titled "Stage Set for a Reality Show." With reason, it cannot be entered and inhabited bodily.

Drawing remains a potent Conceptual exercise. Dave Mueller creates a wall-size "environment" based on marketing trends in popular music -- a reasonable stand-in for nature's panorama. Dike Blair's lovely watercolors function like frames from a cinematic zoom: They scan a domestic interior, pass through a window and land outdoors on a flowering shrub. (The piece owes a distant debt to Michael Snow's classic 1967 film, "Wavelength.") Sam Durant's savvy drawings of 1960s news photographs of social protest events incisively show how the era's triumphant counterculture became the basis for today's artistic culture, while its progressive politics got washed away by a nascent development of the period: Barry Goldwater's populist conservatism.

In the dreary exhibition catalog, the WB curators make a big deal of current artists' engagement with the art, popular culture and politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as if that turbulent period now exerts some meaningful pull on the post-Sept. 11 imagination. ("A significant sea change in contemporary art may be under way.") In fact, all it really represents is the pervasive influence of art schools, which are fully stocked with faculties that were first initiated into art 30 years ago. They, in turn, have taught their students about the art that impacted them as students.

Other satisfactions include Slater Bradley's video-poem on the tension between science and faith; Roni Horn's pungent grouping of free-standing photographs of icebergs, predatory birds and an exquisitely androgynous youth (dangerous beauty!); Jack Pierson's nominal "Self-portrait," composed from images of men he desires in some way; varied films by Sharon Lockhart and the late artists Stan Brakhage and Jack Goldstein; and, finally, Erick Swenson's spooky sculpture of a young albino deer, which rubs its antlers across the soft pile of a Persian rug in a strange face-off between nature and culture. With a few others, I was happy to see them all.

But I would have been equally happy to see any number of other works by any number of other artists. To say the WB is "not as bad as usual" is a far cry from saying "great show." In a great show every choice matters; here, most choices are interchangeable.

I doubt things could be any other way. The WB's fundamental problem is that it has scant reason to exist.

When inaugurated 72 years ago, in the depths of the Great Depression, the survey was evangelical. Living art was identified with Europe, not America, whose citizenry pretty much hated Modern art. Artists were few, and the survey really was a rare platform. The WB had curiosity value.

In that climate, you could forgive the impossible claim to be a national survey of the best, which wilts when you look too closely. In Southern California circa 1932, Agnes Pelton and Henrietta Shore were making paintings every bit as good as anything Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney might encounter in her provincial museum's show. But a New York survey for a New York audience largely unacquainted with the exotic fauna of American art meant the exclusion of Pelton and Shore didn't much matter.

Times change. The WB has changed format over the decades in an effort to keep up. Fifty-seven percent of the artists in the current show are from New York, 22% from L.A. and 21% from Everywhere Else.

Making the trademark matter

Now the catchphrase "the show you love to hate" is ritualistically trotted out with each installment. Never mind that love and hate are passions, and there hasn't been a WB to feel passionate about in years. In our super-size society, art's pluralistic body is way too big to wrap your arms around. Inevitably the big-deal show turns out to be no big deal.

Like coals to Newcastle, it's merely a bunch of art, variously good and bad, biennially trucked into Manhattan's Upper East Side. The show's only cogent rationale is institutional inertia: It happens because it's the Whitney's trademark show.

The sheer size of the contemporary art field makes implausible its claim to be a "national survey of the best." Likewise, today's combination of committed aesthetic pluralism and niche marketing render specious assertions of "new trends." No one -- including, dare I say it, the curators -- can really believe in the survey credibility of the WB.

Giving it up for something else, though, would be like trying to launch New Coke. The only way to "fix" a show like that is to make the established trademark matter again.

Like Pierson's photographs, which uniquely represent his deepest desires, the WB is always a self-portrait of the institution's values at the moment. So, rather than buying work out of the show to add to the museum's permanent collection, as customarily happens, the Whitney could build the 2006 show on only the art it acquires over the next two years. (Or even annually; a biennial's two-year wait adds too much anticipation to what is finally a pseudo-event.) That would likely slash the number of WB artists dramatically, but it would also tell us what the institution truly believes in. And isn't informed commitment what makes an art museum matter?