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ART REVIEW

ART REVIEW; Touching All Bases At the Biennial

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

THAT the latest Whitney Biennial is easily the best in some time probably won't exempt it from the usual carping, the art world's blood sport, although the troika in charge clearly took pains to anticipate some of their critics. The team of curators that the former Whitney director, Maxwell L. Anderson, threw together -- Chrissie Iles, Debra Singer and Shamim M. Momin -- overcame the inevitable strains and nicely capitalized on their differences in taste, coming up with the most cogent and layered biennial in years.

Among other things they have devised a diplomatic affair with mixed generations and familiar names to placate the fashion-conscious who missed having more of them around last time. As custom dictates, a few good discoveries (Alec Soth, a photographer), revived reputations (Alex Hay, Anthony McCall) and oddball inclusions round out the spectrum.

The spirit of the show, it's worth noting, is miles from the recent Documenta, an international overview heavy on explicit politics, somber and evangelistic. This survey, differently parochial, remains upbeat and ingratiating, almost polite, on the surface at least, with a utopian streak and a youth-heavy emphasis on gloss and craft. Politics, while hardly ignored (in works by Andrea Bowers, Sam Durant and Harrell Fletcher, among others), exchange claims of affliction for a greater emphasis on formal allure.

This festival ethos extends to big sculptures in Central Park, a recent biennial tradition, and to the Whitney's roof, where Paul McCarthy, veteran troublemaker, has installed a curvaceous blowup balloon vaguely resembling a Henry Moore sculpture, based on something Mr. McCarthy cooked up as a teenager. It turns the hard-edged museum into a pedestal, amusingly.

Below the surface, the biennial tells a slightly more complicated story. Generational jockeying is one subtext. With young artists looking back nostalgically on the 1960's and 70's, the cross-generational issue has a kind of plangency.

By this I mean that mature artists like Robert Mangold, Raymond Pettibon, Marina Abramovic, Mel Bochner, Mr. McCarthy and the late Jack Goldstein and Stan Brakhage operate with an intensity and even occasional anger that younger biennial artists seem to envy but avoid.

The show documents an art world of youthful talents and hothouse intellects, buoyed by skill, desire and a congenial marketplace but skeptical about their own usefulness in the world at large.

Skepticism is not cynicism, and the prevalent tone is more wistful than hard-edged or satiric.

Somebody will declare this show a welcome sign of the return to painting and drawing, a much-hyped trend lately -- as if painting and drawing were not always around and it weren't the attention of the art world that had wavered. The relevant artists include David Hockney, Elizabeth Peyton (who clearly reveres Mr. Hockney), Julie Mehretu, Dave Muller, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, Laylah Ali, Cecily Brown, Ernesto Caivano and James Siena. All of them convey a kind of ecstatic engagement.

But the real message of what's on view seems to be that deeming painting or drawing alive, then dead, then resurrected, while it certainly helps art dealers move product, no longer bears a relation to a good deal of what's being made. The 1993 biennial, the "political" one, we might recall, advertised itself as a harbinger of the return of drawing.

Many of the present biennial artists, young and old, blur distinctions among media, expanding on the concept of collage: drawings and paintings that resemble photographs (Banks Violette, Ms. Bowers, Mr. Durant, Dike Blair, Robert Longo, Mr. Hay); photographs that, cut and folded, become like sculptures (Jim Hodges); sculptures that use sound (Julianne Swartz); films and videos that imitate paintings (Brakhage, Sharon Lockhart, Eve Sussman); or some combination of these.

That said, there is a broad emphasis on materiality for its own sake: on handmade objects, maybe in response to a digital overload of virtual imagery.

Young artists strut their manual talents -- sometimes to not much end except the strutting -- concocting psychedelic installations and other works of obvious, obsessive industry (Katie Grinnan, Assume Vivid Astro Focus, otherwise known as Eli Sudbrack), which convey a studiously casual, more-is-more additive philosophy.

The historical precedents for this decorative mixing of borrowed forms span Rococo and 1980's Scatter Art. But the approach is also not unlike downloading from the Web, and it gives to much of what's here its melancholic, secondhand air, despite a bright, hectic surface.

It suggests a longing for something big, genuine and heartfelt. It is refined but not original. You might say that much youthful art in the biennial conveys a failure to locate the object of its desire. It is steeped in conflicted nostalgia. Utopia is an art world buzzword these days. It applies to a range of works in the show. But utopia among the younger set does not mean 1960's-style "shake up the world, burn down the house, start from scratch" radicalism; it implies something unattainable, except perhaps in a hand-me-down form, and therefore smaller in scope and inherently poignant.

Andrea Zittel has devised a utopian retreat for herself in Joshua Tree, Calif., that she documents in a Power Point display that is charming and sad. Wade Guyton prints red and black lines and crosses on old photographs of Modernist art and architecture -- utopian plans slyly, almost lovingly, defaced and in the process modestly renewed.

Other artists have formed collectives (Cory Arcangel, Simparch) or they document communities, worlds unto themselves, like little utopias: Catherine Opie photographs a community of California surfers at dawn in the gray half-light -- exquisite pictures. Katy Grannan, with a touch of Arbus-like mockery, photographs strangers as they would wish to see themselves -- dreams of private transcendence tinged by comic pathos.

And Emily Jacir, who as a Palestinian-American is free to travel both to Israel and to the Palestinian territories, imagines a region beyond conflict. She has fulfilled the simple requests of various Palestinians who can't travel. She visited someone's mother's grave, paid a phone bill, went on a blind date and ate someone else's favorite meal in Haifa: modest acts of personal grace she documents in small photographs and brief texts, not stridently political, more like pennies tossed into the ocean of change. Something, they imply, is better than nothing.

You might describe this posture as doubt-filled hope, a paradox that links other works in the biennial. It even applies to the death-metal Gothic strain, another market trend, sometimes glibly linked to 9/11. Most of this work is juvenile, but the best of it exploits teenage angst to convey something of the wincing discomfort of unadulterated emotion and the appeal of nonconformism before it is thwarted by real-world experience and cliché -- a metaphor for art-making.

Mr. Violette's black drum set and satiny black-and-white, X-raylike drawings of Kurt Cobain speak less to the adolescent glamour of rock culture than to the bankruptcy of mass-marketed transgression and to rock's self-destructive side. Sue de Beer's video installation, borrowing from clownish slasher videos by Mr. McCarthy and Mike Kelley, although a bit hard to take, stages childish dramas of painful humor, reminding us what it means to be a teenager desperate for some authentic experience in life.

Other artists in the show combine eroticism and decay to similar purpose. Matthew Barney, who is not in this biennial, seems to have inspired artists along these lines, and not just Mr. Violette and Ms. de Beer. Chloe Piene's jittery drawings, nodding toward Schiele, show emaciated and androgynous figures masturbating. David Altmejd's installation of bejeweled and rotting werewolf heads mounted on huge mirrored platforms, blends ambiguous sexuality with mortification.

In Mr. Altmejd's case, mixing mirrors and images of decay can distantly summon to mind Robert Smithson, the 1970's post-Minimalist sculptor credited by the biennial's curators as important to young artists today. This may be true. Mr. Altmejd's work also alludes to other artists who came to prominence during the 60's and 70's, like Sol LeWitt and Lucas Samaras. Mark Handforth, a young installation artist, nods to Dan Flavin and Richard Serra; various cartooning artists, like Zak Smith and Olav Westphalen, have affinities with Mr. Pettibon, who emerged in the 80's.

Divining ties between younger and older artists would be the usual idle visual speculation if it didn't also suggest a larger point about cultural change. Smithson in his writings talked about entropy, the clash of nature with modern society, and lost utopias. His work expressed his generation's faith in the revolutionary power of art. The difference between his day and today is not even exactly between optimism and skepticism but between two qualities of conviction.

Mr. Bochner's paintings occupy a room beside a video by a rising younger artist, Slater Bradley. They are both memorable, but the differences are instructive. Mr. Bochner, a veteran Conceptualist, paints word associations, starting with words like nothing, mistake, stupid and meaningless, the associations becoming angrier and more obscene. The words are jazzily colored. The emotion is raw.

Mr. Bradley has videotaped a choir of scrubbed children at Notre Dame in Paris. A slow-motion camera picks out their faces during an in-between moment before they sing. The soundtrack, culled from the Replikants, a West Coast band, includes Stephen Hawking talking about Big Bang theory and about the pope asking scientists to quit studying what contradicts creationism. The music swells briefly with the singing of the choir before the image fades. The video is oblique and doleful.

Its use of slow-motion, while a trite device to imply melancholy, may also be a reaction against technology-driven, quick-cut visuals. Ms. Sussman uses it in her film of costumed actors staging Velázquez's "Meninas." The camera pans the painter's studio; the sound is mostly the swoosh of silk robes when people bow and scrape.

It is strangely beautiful. I have left to this point various arresting visuals in the show, which include Brakhage's hand-painted films, loving throwbacks to Abstract Expressionism; Mr. Hay's finely painted imitations of wood grain; Ms. Mehretu's translucent pictures based partly on city plans; and Mr. Pettibon's noirish drawings, which, as always, have a laconic eloquence that is special to him.

Beauty is the biennial's ultimate defense against naysayers, notwithstanding that it is in the eye of the beholder. My vote for show-stopper is Yayoi Kusama's mirrored room of colored lights and water, which should cause people to line up for a peek. Mr. Hodges' trompe l'oeil glass tree branch with bird's nest, and especially his photograph of a landscape, with dozens of tiny cutouts in the shapes of leaves, works that have a subtly memorial feeling, are among the sleepers.

The cut-up photograph is a feat of virtuoso improvisation, nodding toward Matisse and turning a laborious process into something that looks as light as snow or butterfly wings. It's a low-key spectacle and a good metaphor for the show.

The 2004 Biennial Exhibition will be at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street, (212) 570-3676, through May 30. In addition, site-specific outdoor works commissioned in collaboration with the Public Art Fund are in Central Park.

Photos: Clockwise from upper left, "Charles, Vasa, MN" by Alec Soth; "Live to Ride" by Elizabeth Peyton; "Fireflies on the Water" by Yayoi Kusama; and part of Eve Sussman's video "89 Seconds at Alcazar." (Photos by Yossi Milo Gallery [Soth]; Adam Reich [Peyton]; Adam Reich/Robert Miller Gallery [Kusama]; Eve Sussman)(pg. E27); Among the works at the Whitney Biennial are, clockwise from upper left, Robert Mangold's "Column Painting No. 6"; an untitled gouache on paper by Laylah Ali; Jim Hodges' "View From in Here"; Julie Mehretu's ink and acrylic "Rise of the New Supremetists"; and Amy Sillman's oil painting "Hamlet." (Photos by Pace Wildenstein [Mangold]; Susan Bern [Ali]; Stephen White [Hodges]; The Project [Mehretu]; Brent Sikkema Gallery [Sillman])(pg. E38)