

THE ART WORLD

WHAT'S NEW

The Whitney Biennial

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Fantasy tableau: an untitled 2004 painting by the Los Angeles artist Laura Owens.

The new Whitney Biennial is startlingly good. It is better—more serious, more pleasurable—than anyone, perhaps even the curators, Chrissie Iles, Shamim M. Momin, and Debra Singer, could have expected, given the general exhaustion and incoherence of the past decade and a half in art. Essays in the show's catalogue impose the usual theories and exhortations, but the artists largely elude them. All of a sudden, artists are again plainly smarter in their bones than art intellectuals are in their brains. The operative word is "plainly."

Painting and drawing are back. That's the big news of this Biennial. It's not that the handmade pictures in the show are so numerous, though they are, or so good, though many of them are very good

indeed. It's that painting and drawing—the visual mediums in which the creative cooperation of hand, eye, and imagination attains peak efficiency—exercise a gravitational tug on practically everything in the show, including sculptures, installations, videos, photographs, films, and digital animations. Framing and the delineation of vision reign. Tactility counts. Aesthetics trump politics, without suggesting withdrawal from the world.

Though huge and dense, the show exhilarates. (Its superb arrangement, in smallish rooms that often juxtapose works by two or three artists with some particular affinity, helps avert viewer fatigue.) Festivalism—the mode of professional theatricality that has long marked institutional group shows of

contemporary art—barely applies. You will want to revisit works in this Biennial. Here's my short list of highlights: paintings and drawings by David Hockney, Elizabeth Peyton, Laura Owens, Cecily Brown, Amy Sillman, James Siena, Lecia Dole-Recio, Raymond Pettibon, Robyn O'Neil, Robert Mangold, Chloe Piene, and Laylah Ali; video installations by Catherine Sullivan, Craigie Horsfield, Eve Sussman, and Slater Bradley; a photographic-conceptual work by Roni Horn; and exactly one mixed-media installation, by a group called assume vivid astro focus.

Hockney, the veteran showoff, is prepossessing again, in an instructive way. His glamorous portraits and large views of California, all in watercolor, hang in a room that is dominated, in spirit, by Elizabeth Peyton's small, fiercely adoring paintings and drawings of androgynous young people, including herself. It's as if Peyton had recalled Hockney to order, after his questionable forays into neocubism and clever theories of optics, reminding him that his innate gift for decorative charm is what we crave from him, unadulterated by great-artist longeurs. The art world must be in good shape when a fashion-sensitive fellow like Hockney confidently lets fly with what he does best. As for Peyton, the distilled allure of her little pictures makes them, for me, the moral center of the Biennial. Her romantic aestheticism charges her swift line and intense color with a sense of the sacred.

It's interesting to register the collapse of conviction in current installational work. Gone are the heydays of Robert Gober, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, David Hammons, Cady Noland, and other masters (none present in this Biennial) who exploded tropes of painting and sculpture into aggressively themed social space. The better installations here are nervously seductive, featuring lights, glitzy materials, and precious bric-a-brac. The neo-psychedelic disco provided by assume vivid astro focus takes crowd-pleasing to giddy heights with a tall, round-cornered room whose wallpaper and painted floor of overlaid Pop images reacts sensorially to shifting colored light, as a d.j. atop a spiral staircase manages catchy house music. The work is pure fun.

Most installations in the show palpably fall back on pictorial and sculptural

conventions. I had an epiphany, in this regard, while looking at a large painting by Laura Owens, a Los Angeles artist with an avant-gardist background; it is a fantasy tableau of a tree (rendered in runny paint), cute animals, a cartoon seascape with ships, and dollops of thick paint that may represent falling leaves. It struck me as an installational piece pulled flat. Why go to the trouble of deploying things in real space when, with painting, you can make their essences comprehensible at a glance? As a bonus, if you're Owens, you can enhance the encounter with hauntingly sophisticated color.

Video installation is now a fully mature and independent art form that synthesizes aspects of narrative and documentary film, painting, sculpture, and decoration in real space and time. Craigie Horsfield enchants with a four-walled projection of a misty forest in the Canary Islands. Watching it, you have an experience that would be more transporting only if it included getting chilled and wet. (Also spiritually touristic is Roni Horn's distribution, throughout the museum, of sumptuous photographs of a beautiful boy, hienatic birds, and gloomy icebergs, all from Iceland.) Slater Bradley's close-ups of a youth choir in the cathedral of Notre-Dame stunningly capture states of gawkiness and anxiety in kids whose singing channels divinity. Catherine Sullivan, using actors trained in antic, Richard Foreman-ish stylizations, fills several screens with eerie evocations of war and tyranny in a twentieth-century Eastern Europe of the mind. Eve Sussman's twelve-minute-long high-definition video, "89 Seconds at Alcazar," takes on nothing less than Velázquez's "Las Meninas." With actors in full costume on a set that reproduces the room in the painting, Sussman imagines the activity—bristling with the tensions of the royal household, which seem to affect even the long-suffering pet dog—that might have preceded and followed the split-second arrangement of Velázquez's virtual photograph. As an aficionado of that enigmatic masterpiece, I have nits to pick with Sussman's speculations, but I salute a ravishing new wrinkle in art-historical criticism.

I can't decide if established, estimable painters and drafters like Brown, Sillman, Siena, and Pettibon have abruptly improved or if the new authority of their work mirrors the Zeitgeist. In the case of Brown's sexy Expressionism—nudes in bed, oppressed by darkling atmospheres that are pregnant with demonic intimations—both possibilities seem likely. Among the newcomers, Lecia Dole-Recio gives a sharp boost to the sagging fortunes of abstraction. Her large, unframed works on paper, entailing tiny cutout and collaged bits of painterly and geometric detail, are wonderfully decorative when glimpsed, and rivetingly thoughtful when perused. In a very different style, Dole-Recio evokes the lyrical rigor of a young Ellsworth Kelly. Robyn O'Neil's vast fantasy drawing of minuscule middle-aged men and animals in a mountainous snowscape is a graphite epic. You get lost in it. Chloe Piene is represented by a lugubrious, highly resistible video projection, in which a dirt-stained young woman writhes in masochistic rapture, but also by similarly themed, terrific drawings whose snarling line bears companion with that of Egon Schiele.

Least engaging for me at the Whitney are works in key with some tententious discourse or another, which, at present, commonly express nostalgia for nineteen-sixties-type counterculturalism. "Legality IS NOT Morality," trumpets a light-box sign by the protest-minded Sam Durant, to which I fancy a modish young smart-aleck of more recent vintage responding, "Well, duh." A new militant idealism may or may not be afoot and effective in society (if only by torpedoing another Democrat with votes for Ralph Nader), but it shows little promise of making an important difference in art. More compelling is the curators' peculiar selection of older artists, including the minimalist painter Robert Mangold, the pioneer conceptualist Mel Bochner, and the painterly filmmakers Stan Brakhage and Jack Goldstein, both of whom died last year. All four might be seen as cool, brainy types tempted by the dark joys of picture-making. Their presence suggests a sharply revised perspective on the recent past, as a tradition. Such backward adjustment of reputations always occurs when art moves forward. Am I sanguine? Yes, on the condition that art's attentive audience—you and I—assures our artists that their best instincts are noted and appreciated, and that more, and still better, is expected of them. ♦

AN INVITATION TO RESPOND DIRECTLY TO THE NEW YORKER'S ADVERTISERS.

RSVP

READER SERVICE VALUE PROGRAM

ART & ANTIQUES

TAI GALLERY/TEXTILE ARTS is one of the world's finest galleries featuring the art of traditional textiles and Japanese bamboo art. For more info and show schedule visit: www.textilearts.com.

AUTOMOTIVE

BMW ANY WEATHER. ANY CORNER. ANY PACE. ANY PASSION. The all-new BMW X3 Sports Activity Vehicle. Visit bmwusa.com/newX3 or call 1-800-334-4BMW.

FINANCIAL SERVICES

TIAA-CREF. For over 80 years TIAA-CREF has helped the world's sharpest minds look forward to a secure and rewarding future. Find out how TIAA-CREF can help you achieve your financial goals. Log on to www.tiaa-cref.org for ideas, advice and results, or call 1-800-842-1924.

FURNISHINGS & ACCESSORIES

QUEL OBJET.COM. Traditional French motifs and products updated to a modern, playful and colorful elegance: table linens and ceramic chickens, with deck chairs, espadrilles, and razzetous on the way. Visit QuelObjet.com.

HEALTH CARE

C.G. JUNG-INSTITUTE ZÜRICH SWITZERLAND SUMMER INTENSIVE in Analytical Psychology, June 28-July 9, 2004. Topics: Case work, dreams, fairy tales, religion, music, alchemy, creative work & more. www.junginstitut.ch. Phone 011-44-41-914-10-42. Email kuerter@junginstitut.ch.

HILTON HEAD HEALTH INSTITUTE. Located on beautiful Hilton Head Island, Hilton Head Health Institute has been the world's premier weight loss spa for over 25 years. Visit www.hhhealth.com or call 1-800-292-2440.

TRAVEL

ALPINE TRAILS, LTD. Hike the Swiss and Italian Alps with popular author/mountaineer Fred Jacobson. Small groups of active outdoor enthusiasts who also appreciate high-level creature comforts. 32nd year! Call 1-800-291-8126 or e-mail alpine.travel@verizon.net or visit us at www.alptrails.com.

KIAWAH ISLAND GREAT BEACH VACATIONS. Private, security-gated beach resort near Historic Charleston. Free 32-page color guides. Call our trip-planning concierge or surf our Web guides today! Call 1-866-361-6945 or visit www.kiawahresort.com.

PETER DEIMANN CRUISES. Enchanting 7 to 11-night luxury cruises on Europe's most majestic rivers. Magnificent scenery. Pre-post cruise stays. All-inclusive tours also available. For a free brochure, call 1-800-277-1436. Visit www.deimann-cruises.com.

WHISTLER.COM SNOW VACATIONS. Whistler Hotel Deals, Vacation packages and complete Whistler-Blackcomb Resort information year-round. Whistler.com is your live connection to Whistler, BC. One-stop-shop. Visit www.whistler.com or call your local resort experts toll-free at 1-866-299-6970.

For more information, log on to www.newyorkerreaderlink.com

IF UNABLE TO REACH TELEPHONE LISTINGS, SEND REQUESTS, WITH ISSUE DATE NOTED, TO THE NEW YORKER READER SERVICES, 4 TIMES SQUARE, 21ST FLOOR, NEW YORK, NY 10036