



**PRIDE NIGHT**  
PRESENTED BY  Resorts World CASINO  
NEW YORK CITY

 NEW YORK LIBERTY

 INDIANA FEVER

FRI | JUNE 19 | 7:30 PM  
FOR TICKETS VISIT  
[NYLIBERTY.com](http://NYLIBERTY.com)

## The OK Corral

### Leaving postmodernist and postminimalist strategies behind and breathing fresh air

**Jerry Saltz**

published: March 09, 2004

Call this the OK Biennial. The 2004 Whitney Biennial never goes off-the-tracks bad but it rarely goes off-the-charts good, either. There's a lot of worthy work on hand, some surprises, and a few high moments. Artists I'm only mildly interested in impress. But overall it's tame. There's not a lot of heat

here, and little that's juicy or transcendental. Sometimes you feel the curators are just covering their bases, pulling cool artists from the right cliques. Politics are internal, not external. Still, at a time when biennials, triennials, and Documentas are as overblown, irritating, and automatic as Academy Award ceremonies, when it's not clear who or what these carnivalesque cattle calls are for, Chrissie Iles, Shamim M. Momin, and Debra Singer—the three Whitney curators appointed by former director Maxwell Anderson—should be cheered for giving us a biennial that has the virtue of being a fairly accurate, occasionally sparkling snapshot of what *now* looks like in American art.

"OK" isn't damning with faint praise: "OK" may be as good as one of these probably obsolete, regularly wretched beasts can be today. Maurizio Cattelan's alleged burial of his biennial piece somewhere on the museum's second floor is an apt metaphor for how artists are ill served by these circuses. "OK" means this is the best biennial since the 1997 edition. This exhibition captures art and the museum at a beguiling moment: Leaving postmodernist and postminimalist strategies behind and breathing fresh air. So this is also a Course Correction or Thank God Biennial, a show that says the last two biennials were flukes.

photo: Robin Holland



Laura Owens: *Untitled* (2004)

Details:

#### **2004 Whitney Biennial**

Whitney Museum of American Art  
945 Madison Avenue  
Through May 30

This biennial is the most art-center-centric one in decades: A whopping 80 of its 108 participants live in New York or Los Angeles. Twenty-one artists are over 50; 64 are under 40, and 15 of those are in their twenties. So you're seeing the tip of a new generation, which is exciting. Sadly, this show is short on artists of color. As for mediums, Iles observes, "We have something like 20 painters, 23 sculptors, and 15 film and video installations." Video and sculpture are strongest, and very painterly.

Photography is almost absent, and painting is weak, although Laura Owens's buoyant imaginary tree and Elizabeth Peyton's stunning self-portrait are the two best works in the exhibition. Amy Sillman, James Siena, Mel Bochner, Fred Tomaselli, and Lecia Dole-Recio also look good. Cameron Martin and Tam Van Tran are passable but not biennial material and David Hockney looks lame, my soft spot for him notwithstanding.

Two things constrain this show. The first is that too many artists are present without affecting the exhibition much (e.g., Andrea Bowers, Laylah Ali, Robert Mangold, Sam Durant, Robyn O'Neil, Cory Arcangel/BEIGE, Terence Koh, Taylor Davis, Hockney, and, I'm afraid, Cattelan, and Paul McCarthy's towering inflatable on the roof). The other is the team's weakness for artists who are only moderately talented but immensely, if inexplicably, popular in curatorial circles (e.g., Craigie Horsfield, Sharon Lockhart, Mary Kelly, Lee Mingwei, Liz Craft, Katie Grinnan, and Dario Robleto—none of whom, it must be said, bomb here). In their savvy catalog introduction, the curators assert that "a significant sea change in contemporary art is under way." That change is evident here. It's just difficult to see because of these mid-range artists.

It's impossible to sum up 108 artists, but Raymond Pettibon, in his vivacious installation, includes a phrase that rings true: "The Piecemeal Kingdom." Much of the art on hand is ephemeral and looks as if it were made of parts or built step-by-step. Standouts in this piecemeal kingdom are David Altmejd, Eric Wesley, Mark Handforth, possibly Christian Holstad and Matthew Ronay, and certainly Julianne Swartz, whose stairwell installation fills the air with the sounds of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." In addition to a sprinkling of sculpture influenced, however indirectly, by Jessica Stockholder or Rachel Harrison, there's a lot of what I call "little art": drawings or collages or sculptural arrangements done with lots of wee bits, things, marks, or parts. Interestingly, what this work is trying to supplant may demand just this kind of littleness. Call it termite tactics.

After Owens and Peyton, the most ravishing works in this show are Yayoi Kusama's walk-in room of colored lights and Slater Bradley's video love song to the cosmos. I also really liked Dave Muller's wall, Erick Swenson's elegant deer, Harrell Fletcher's James Joyce video, Andrea Zittel's kooky study center, Emily Jacir's Palestinian project, Aïda Ruilova's bombarding video snippets, the extraordinary music of Antony and the Johnsons, Eve Sussman's video Velázquez, Deborah Stratman's film in the Simparch installation, Marina Abramovic's poignant video, Jim Hodges, Spencer Finch, Yutaka Sone, Catherine Sullivan, and the best yet Central Park sculpture installations.

The art world is dying to like the 2004 Whitney Biennial. The opening was a lovefest. Previews in magazines and newspapers essentially implored, "Can't we all just get along and love the biennial?" Nearly all trotted out the cliché "the show everyone loves to hate." Disliking exhibitions is seen by some to be disloyal or obstructionist. This is traceable to the fact that in America today criticism and even civil disagreement are implicitly discouraged; people love to hate or even demonize those whose views differ from their own. But, criticizing flawed exhibitions isn't hating them. It's a way of treating them with respect. Mostly, the good wishes for this show stem from the fact that everyone wants the Whitney to be great again. This OK Biennial is an excellent step.

---

**Related Story:**

["Making a Wish List: Nagging Qualms About the Biennial"](#) by Jerry Saltz

---

[jsaltz@villagevoice.com](mailto:jsaltz@villagevoice.com)