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The Whitney Biennial 1991

Steven Kaplan

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NEW YORK

The Whitney Biennial 1991

Occurring with periodic regularity in a high visibility venue with all the trappings of art establishment power, the Whitney Biennial as a long-standing institution is just slightly older than another closely related institution : that of Biennial bashing. For three months every other Spring, this most prestigious and wealthy museum dedicated to the exhibition of American art serves up its version of the best and the brightest, raising the hackles of critics, the ire of excluded artists and galleries, and providing a sitting target for jibes, in jokes, innuendo and controversy.

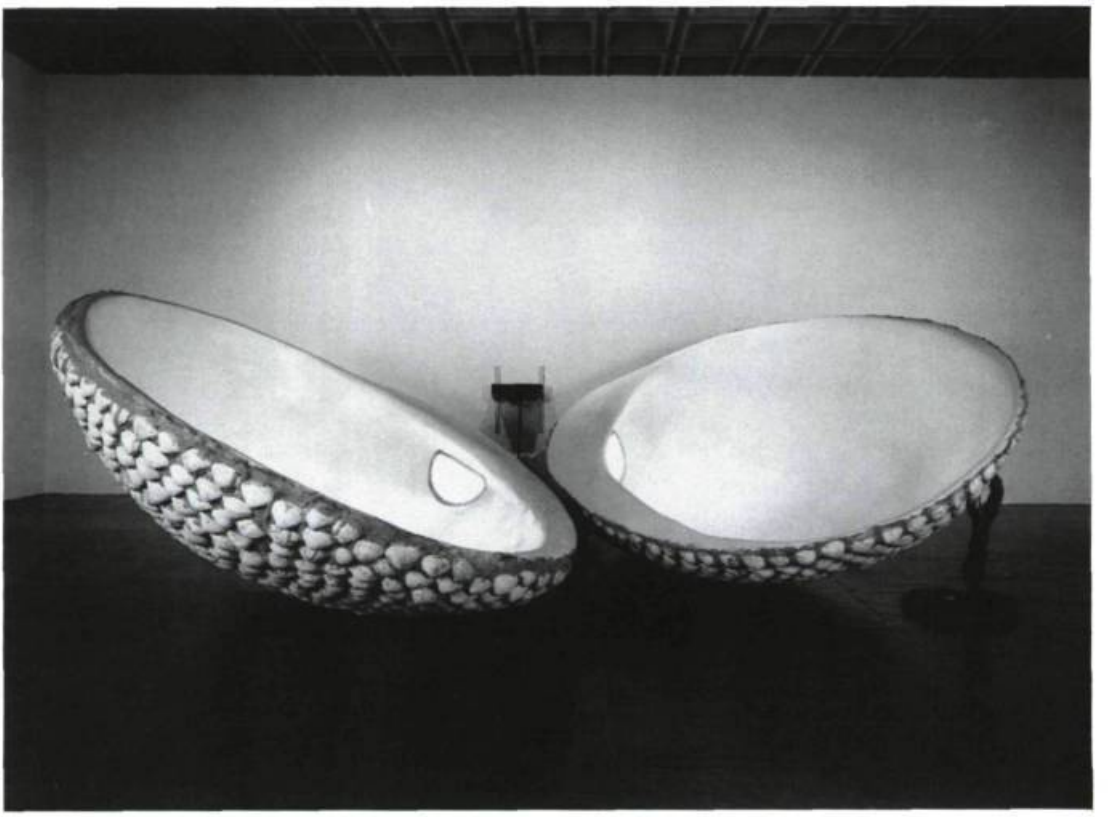
The Biennial is the show people love to hate, too grand and gussied up a target to avoid the habitual mudslinging. It's downright unfashionable for any professional observer of the art scene to approve wholeheartedly of the exhibition ; any praise must be tempered with a knowing smirk or an aside on the political exigencies that led to the selection or deletion of a particular work. Charges usually levelled against the Whitney director, curators, even the trustees, include : pandering to the marketplace and to the interests of prominent blue-chip dealers, powerful collectors and corporate sponsors ; fostering a New York-centric point of view, to the detriment of art from regional centers ; underrepresenting women and minority artists in favor of the best selling, generally white male practitioners of paintbrush-as-penis ; adhering to a flavor-of-the-month curatorial process, in which the trendy and ephemeral is selected over the academic and substantial, or, depending on your personal POV, in which the old, entrenched and boring is preferred to the young, restless and spectacular.

In planning for the current Biennial, certain preliminary, precautionary steps were undertaken by the new Whitney director (David Ross) and his curatorial staff (Richard Armstrong, Richard Marshall and Lisa Phillips) to help nip the usual criticism in the bud. This is a Biennial in which the museum is obviously trying harder to please all of the people some of the time (or some of the people all of the time) and to maintain a veneer of the politically correct.

Toward this end, the Whitney has decided to use its entire exhibition space for the 1991 Biennial, a total commitment not undertaken in a decade. This largest Biennial in recent memory features work from over 70 painters, sculptors, photographers and installation artists (as well as thirty video and filmmakers), occupying the entire second, third and fourth floor galleries as well as the lobby, sunken courtyards, large sections of the basement and even part of the stairwell. To accomplish this, the third floor permanent collection, a sacrosanct touchstone of the board of trustees, had to be temporarily removed. One can only imagine the backroom squabbling from certain quarters, heartbroken at the prospect of being denied their beloved Edward Hoppers for three whole months.

This extravagant, symbolic gesture – kicking back the walls to make room for the art, for a more inclusive, kinder and gentler, more pluralistic viewpoint – is complemented by the Whitney's formation of an advisory committee for the 1991 Biennial, a panel of height regional art professionals (from Boston, Atlanta, Miami, San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, Washington D.C. and Jamaica) to help identify significant artists from their respective areas. And, especially among the younger artists exhibiting on the upper floors, there seems to be a more significant regional appearance than in recent Biennials, as if each of the regional professionals was given an informal caveat to insert at least one favorite son or daughter into the august halls of the Big Museum.

Age or "generations", as the Whitney catalogue, press release and wall text would have it, is a big issue in this Biennial, foregrounded by the segregation of particular age groups to particular floors. This strategy does not really work thematically, spatially or æsthetically, as artists often find themselves in very strange company, not only on the same floor but in the same room. But fitting four round holes into one square room has usually been a flaw of past Biennials in their attempt to place a lot of work into a finite space. Age is not a particularly evil criterion for organization, and with three main floors of exhibition space, the curators



Vito Acconci, *Convertible Clam Shelter*, 1990. Fiberglass, steel, clam shells, audio and electric lights.

bask in the luxury of slicing into the Biennial as a three-tiered layer cake, recapitulating the three-stepped architecture of the Whitney's Marcel Breuer building.

Placed on the second floor, presumably to give them only one flight of stairs to climb, are the oldest artists, those who came into prominence during the 50s and 60s, running the gamut from Joan Mitchell, Philip Pearlstein, Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Cy Twombly, Roy Lichtenstein and Robert Rauschenberg to the younger cadre of Pat Steir, Bruce Nauman, Chuck Close and Alex Katz. No big surprises here, on a floor of mixed quality but uniformly big, blue-chip reputations, a floor possibly undertaken to assuage the ruffled feathers of outraged trustees still bemoaning the loss of their sacred permanent collection. Some haunting, post-minimal bronze sculptures with a tactile, sensuous bent from Twombly ; beautiful abstractions by Mitchell ; Pearlstein's opalescent figure studies ; Steir's large, Japanesque waterfall canvases ; and Nauman's uncannily faux naif video installation of his own head, spinning upside down and humming – these are the pieces that come off best. Stella's gargantuan, overwrought sculpture-cum-molten lead painting leaves the worst taste – a convoluted, overly ambitious attempt to live up to his formidable reputation – closely followed by Johns's sly, supercilious canvases and two facile, schematic combines by Rauschenberg. The curators did none of the last three a particular favor in spotlighting this recent work, which pales in comparison to the elegance, compression and precision of their groundbreaking work from three decades past. The abstract expressionist canvases of Joseph Glasco, a

Texas-based painter and definitely not part of the New York thing, is a welcome off-center entry. But providing the biggest jolt, the greatest frisson on floor two, are the previously overlooked photographs of John Coplans, large-scale b / w representations of the sculptural tucks and folds of his aging, hairy corpus. Although Coplans is 70, this body of photographic work is scarcely a decade old. On a floor of (mostly) painting and (some) sculpture, both Coplans's medium and his subjective obsession with the body provide a link to younger artists exhibiting on the floors above.

The Whitney's third floor is a mid-career station, comprising artists who came of age in the 70s and 80s. This "survivors of the 80s" *étage* includes such likely suspects as Julian Schnabel, Eric Fischl, Elizabeth Murray, David Salle and Cindy Sherman, all of whom have previously enjoyed retrospectives at the museum. But the first thing you run into on floor three is Vito Acconci's *Convertible Clam Shelter*, a multimedia installation with sound and light that echoes his adaptable wall bras and once again invigorates a longtime strategy of subverting scale and intent in art meant for public installation and usage. Acconci, like Nauman on floor two (and, since the two are contemporaries, the question of why they show on separate floors immediately comes to mind), is an artist in a continual state of reinvention, and the freshness that results is original and compelling, as well as playful and adroit. Also notable on floor three : a sculpture by Schnabel that is as awfully excessive and overladen, in its mock-angst physicality, as the Stella on floor two is awfully overdetermined ; several playful, polymorphously perverse, neo-Dr. Seussian canvases by Carroll Dunham (from a body of work previously reviewed by this critic in this column) ; Robert Gober's monstrous / comic body parts (a torso that is half male and half female, a pair of buttocks inscribed with a piece of sheet music) ; and Mark Tansey's *Wheel*, his only piece of sculpture ever, which offers a three part metaphysical mix and match of subject, verb and object – a creative tool for his future painting.

In one room that is obviously meant to collect and isolate the folk art-ethnic-decorative impulse, we find the pattern-and-decoration collages of Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt, the post graffitti work of the late Keith Haring, and the monumental figurative Southwestern fiberglass sculptures of the great Luis Jiminez. Another "thematic" room conflates Gober's biological freak show, McDermott and McGough's fey, coy sendup of late 19th century empiricism in a wall of twenty toned b / w photographs demonstrating scientific properties (like an 1884 Mr. Wizard), and Ellen Phelan's spooky, off-register paintings of sky and landscape.

The specter of weird or uncertain science continues in a room that combines Cindy Sherman's recent photography (which apes the content of mannerist portraiture but employs prosthetic breasts and other biomorphic or theatrical props), Dunham's aforementioned paintings, and the most resonant, ambivalent and disturbing piece on the third floor, Mike Kelley's laboriously titled *Empathy Displacement : Human Morphology (2nd and 3rd Remove)*. Kelley, an L.A. conceptual and performance artist who was also included in the 1989 Biennial, where he exhibited stuffed dolls, wild patchwork quilts and baby blankets, has made the dark underbelly of cuteness and psychic regression his subject for a number of years. He now presents us with a graveyard for his dolls. On the wall is a row of paintings, two dimensional, b / w effigies of a number of dolls. In front of each is a black box (coffin) with a lift-off panel that reveals the doll itself, encased and entombed. The combination of these quotidian, innocuous objects produces a remarkable frisson, but is it empathy, pathos or sarcasm that Kelley hopes to elicit, or is he actually telling us "no more dolls", signalling the end of a body of work ?). In our current era of New World (Dis)Order, when billions are spent for offense in Iraq while art grants are cut, exhibitions are censored, and AIDS treatment is placed on a back burner, the ambivalent uncertainties of Kelley's piece convincingly mirror the skewed, confused emotional priorities of the moment.

Kelley provides the perfect introduction to the fourth floor, which is the most political and politically correct (PC) floor of the Biennial, comprising one art collective and 28 artists that have attained a certain prominence in the last two years. And talking about PC : included are 14 women artists (just about half the

Mike Kelley, *Empathy Displacement : Humanoid Morphology (2nd and 3rd Remove)*, 1990 ; Acrylic on panels, handmade stuffed dolls in wood boxes.

floor), at least six gay or lesbian artists and seven artists of color or from ethnic minorities.

If the 80s were the age of Reagan, white male yuppie excess, and the amoral recklessness of financial speculation, then this is posited as the 90s floor, a hasty corrective for our recent sins and a premonition of the awakened conscience that will characterize our march to the year 2000. Or, as curator Richard Armstrong dares to conjecture in the conclusion to his Biennial catalogue essay : "If the decade of the 1980s, with its burgeoning art production, market, and attendant hyperbole, came to resemble the 1960s, will the 1990s recall the subtle hybridization of abstraction and expressionism of the 1970s, or even that of the 1950s ?" The "subtle hybridization" referred to above resolves itself into a curatorial bias toward mixed media installation and other non-traditional forms of expression on the fourth floor, as opposed to the overwhelming predominance of painting on floor two and painting, sculpture and photography on three. The fourth floor's touchstone is installation art, from Cady Noland's garage-like room (actually six separately named pieces, but I challenge any viewer to indicate where one ends and the other begins) comprising displaced hardware, scaffolding, cyclone fencing, auto parts, blown up newspaper photos of Lee Harvey Oswald and Patty Hearst, and a million six packs of Budweiser, to Jessica Diamond's wall drawings of cautionary and foreboding economic realities ; to Christian Marclay's Tape Fall, the slow unwinding of tape from a reel-to-reel deck that lends the sound of gurgling, rushing water to the Whitney's poured concrete stairwell while forming an ever-growing heap of loose tape at the base of the stairs.

Certainly there are delectable and collectable works

of art on four : Adam Fuss's subtle color photographs of what seem to be disturbances in still water ; Jeanne Dunning's delicately alienating portraits of the backs of women's heads ; Rona Pondick's psychosexual sculptures, including a large futon-like bed crisscrossed by a grid of ropes and baby formula bottles, and two miniature upholstered chairs sporting buttock-like cushions and wearing shoes ; and Nayland Blake's *art d'abatoir*, sculptures assembled from stainless steel butcher or dissecting tables, meat cleavers, rings, chains and rubber or leather harnesses or restraints, work that teeters, iconically, between kinky bondage / discipline and the slaughterhouse. There are even paintings (!) on four : Rebecca Purdum's large, ghostly semi-figurative abstractions ; Philips Smith's geometric, totemic overlays; and Jim Shaw's amazing roomful of 107 caricatures, cartoons, comic strips and mixed media pieces collectively entitled My *Mirage*.

The fact of personal difference, whether racial or sexual, actively informs the work of a number of artists on four. Both Carrie Mæ Weems and Lorna Simpson (whose work was reviewed previously in this column) employ a conjunction of photography and narrative or descriptive text to comment on the status of black women in America. Glenn Ligon's found language paintings explore the subject of blackness from an arch, caustic linguistic standpoint. Issues of gay identity and sensibility are raised by Felix Gonzalez-Torres in *Untitled (Lover Boys)*, a pile of 355 pounds of silver wrapped candies (the combined body weights of the artist and his male lover) placed in the corner of a room, recalling the 60s installations of rock and glass by Robert Smithson, but with an obvious emotional distance. Also in the gay revelatory mode is the aforementioned work by Nayland Blake ; Larry Johnson's poster-like commentaries on media drenched narcissism, consumerisim and camp, replete with the bogus snowcaps of Christmas greeting cards ; and David Wojnarowicz's heroic, adventurous multimedia pieces (from a body of work previously reviewed in this column).

The AIDS debacle is confronted head on by the Group Material collective (comprising Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Karen Ramspacher) in their lobby installation of an AIDS Timeline. A room filled with wall texts, video, media and industrial artifacts, and art produced during the AIDS years (1979 to the present), the timeline foregrounds the AIDS crisis against a cultural backdrop and eloquently denotes what was actually transpiring in America, what our dreams, usages and breakfasts looked like, while a disease was allowed to run rampant and, for the most part, unchecked. Although physically placed in the Whitney's lobby space, the *AIDS Timeline* shares the cautionary social critique and political awareness of much of the art on the fourth floor.

A general take on the Biennial indicates that we are not living in particularly happy, contented or resolved times. The generally brooding, depressive and critical quality of much of the work, especially the rather dull cutting edge of the two upper floors, reveals a climate conditioned by disappointment but striving toward convalesence. Faced with economic recession, cutbacks on institutional funding for the arts, the drying up of the spenthrift marketplace of the 80s, the continuing specter of censorship, AIDS and a government seemingly more committed to foreign military adventurism and special interests than to taking care of its own people, today's artists do not have a lot to rave about. If the Whitney acutely expresses this dark vision, it is filling its proper role as a barometer of the art world *circa* 1991. The saving grace of the Biennial's art is not just that things can get better, but that the intervention of art into our general culture can both provide a cautionary commentary and elicit authentic moments of æsthetic joy.

STEVEN KAPLAN