

The Whitney Biennial

Whitney Museum of American Art

John Ewing

The Whitney Biennial...phew, I'm already tired. With tons of work by over a hundred artists, you leap into the maelstrom hoping to come out the other end with something solid. Will it be a silk purse or a sow's ear? This time around it's a purse. The 2004 Biennial is sure-footed and thorough-going. Instead of bombast, buzz and bleeding sound, this Biennial keeps you engaged, engrossed and anticipating what lies around the corner.

The 2004 Biennial was organized by three Whitney curators: Chrissie Iles, curator of film and video; Shamim M. Momin, branch director and curator of the Whitney Museum at Altria; and Debra Singer, associate curator of contemporary art. Given the recent shake-ups and washouts at the Whitney, it is encouraging to see intelligence, imagination and good sense prevail. Instead of imposing arbitrary themes, the curators have wisely followed the artists' lead and articulated observational categories: An Intergenerational Conversation, Looking Back, Other Worlds, Materiality and Process and Drawing and Painting.

Thankfully, these are talking points rather than installation directives. The show itself is lithe and flexible. Also, there's a refreshing, leisurely groove from floor to floor—thanks to a thoughtful installation that separates experiences when necessary (i.e. loud video installations, quite environments, bright lights), and keeps the viewer steadily moving without physical or mental bottlenecks.

As always, there are a score of mini-shows under the Biennial banner. Here are some alternative suggestions:

The "Anti-Corruption" Biennial—Fears about government and big business are palpable throughout. In the museum lobby, Sam Durant's electric signs proclaim *Legality is not Morality* and *No Lie Can Live Forever*—statements echoed in his graphite drawings made from photographs of protests. Barnaby Furnas' painting *Hamburger Hill* depicts the splatter gore of a military charge, but the combatants are in business suits and the scene reads like a first-generation video game. Olav Westphalen's life-size, polystyrene businessmen wear suits, sunglasses and handcuffs.

Raymond Pettibon's stream-of-consciousness drawings of exotic animals, explosions and flags carry cryptic, hand-painted slogans like, "Wash the baptism back to Washington." Catherine Sullivan's bravura five-channel video installation *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* echoes Pettibon's wacky allusions with elaborately staged scenes of social buffoonery in a grand, beaux arts-style building—the actors, costumes and props are straight from Soviet-era "central casting."

The "Haunted" Biennial—Skeletons, skulls and dead things aplenty. But like art historical *vanitas*, these seemingly macabre elements ring different notes. David Altmejd's mixed-media installation *Delicate Men*



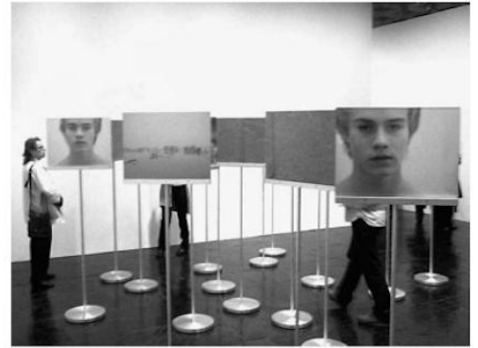
Dario Robleto, *Hippies And A Ouija Board (Everyone Needs To Cling To Something)*, 2003

Cast bone dust, home-cultured antibiotics, crushed velvet, leather and mixed-media
23 x 19 x 42 inches

in Positions of Power features faux skulls and corpses of half-desiccated monkey hounds sporting Farrah Fawcett wigs, jewelry and BVDs. This handmade, disco-styled graveyard is arranged on minimalist black showcases with mirrored cubbies and little groupings of gleaming, acrylic blocks. The crisp combination of sparkling nostalgia, cool glamour and death rot is complicated food for the imagination.

By comparison, Dario Robleto's low-fi relics look sweetly precious if not downright old-fashioned. The San Antonian is in good form here, though in a much less extravagant mode than his over-the-top Whitney solo show at Altria last year. His bone-enriched anachronisms have never been more imaginative or magical, such as the patent medicine peddler's case, complete with funky bottles of elixir, beat-up 45s and Ouija board. *Vatican Radio—broadcasting from the past*—and the low-mounted, double slung pelvic bones of *Our Sin Was in Our Hips* are funny, creepy and rich with cultural history.

There's Liz Craft's *Death Rider (Libra)*, a bronze, Harley ridin' skeleton in the museum lobby, and a ghostly Judy Garland moment in the stairwell as strains of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* (sung by amateurs) waft down through a network of plastic tubing (Julianne Swartz' *Somewhere Harmony*). Even Cecily



Roni Horn, *Doubt by Water*, 2003-04

Two-sided photographs, aluminum stanchions and plastic holder

Image 16¹/₂ x 22 inches, stanchion 70¹/₂ x 14 inches

Brown's paintings of reclining nudes and Chloe Piene's nude tracings on velum have a haunted, perceptibly skeletal quality.

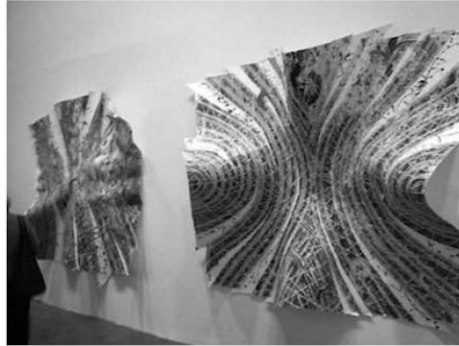
Definitely spooky, Sue de Beer's video installation *Hans und Greta* is a trippy contemporary fairytale of drunk and aimless youth. These kids are pierced, pregnant and have a penchant for cutting up stuffed animals. Their innocence and violence both spring from a confused longing below the threshold of consciousness. From the perspective of artistic practice, a related, bittersweet vibe of solitariness seems to echo throughout the exhibition.

The macabre grand prize goes to Marina Abramovi's mesmerizing video installation *Count on Us*, in which the artist wears front-and-back human skeletons to conduct a children's choir. On various screens, the children perform an anthem about the United Nations, Abramovi gets all charged up by an arcing Tesla coil and a young boy and girl sweetly sing gorgeous Slavic folk songs against blood-red backdrops. The piece is ripe with political allusions and "intimations of (im)mortality." And, the lilting, hum-able tunes are in your head the rest of the floor. This Biennial disturbs...subtly.

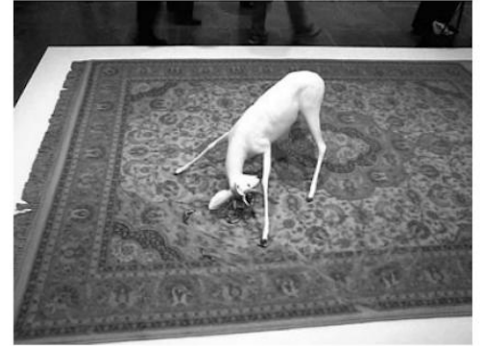
The "Twinkle-Light Reflective" Biennial—Despite the darker themes mentioned, this is no "downer Biennial." It also sparkles, shines and reflects. Yayoi Kusama's *Fireflies on the Water* is a mirrored cubicle with hanging twinkle lights and reflective pool. That wonderful *mise en abyme* effect occurs in Altmejd's and Swartz' work, too. Virgil Marti's sparkling *Grow Room*, with its flowered, reflective walls and resin-antler light fixtures, is transplanted virtually untouched from a 2003 gallery show at Participant on Rivington Street downtown. There's also Mark Handforth's hot orange, fluorescent *Western Sun* and reflective *Highway Star* (though, oddly, your eyes don't seem to fully take in his third



Sue de Beer, *Hans und Grete*, 2002
Two-channel video installation
Dimensions variable



Tam Van Tran, *Beetle Manifesto XI*, 2004
Chlorophyll, spirulina, pigment, staples, binder and paper
89 x 86 x 21 inches



Erick Swenson, *Untitled*, 2001
Synthetic polymer on polyurethane resin
26 x 132 x 84 inches

piece—*DiamondBrite*—a gargantuan, green, upside down "No Exit" highway sign. Maybe that's the point).

The "Eco-Political" Biennial—The tricky intersection of humanity and the environment feels like a recurring theme in this Biennial. Julie Mehretu's large, cityscape abstractions are hung in a room with "green artist" Tam Van Tran's *Beetle Manifestos*—big, undulating wall pieces made from strips of paper soaked in chlorophyll and spirulina and stapled together. Dallas artist Erick Swenson's rutting-dear-on-oriental-carpet sculpture sits between them. Andrea Zittel recreated a room from her Joshua Tree "trailer home"; a video diary recounts the fascinating story of her eco-art projects and living with other desert bohos.

Houstonian Robyn O'Neil's ArtPace über-drawing—a snow scene with fir trees, delicate animals and a lot of little men running around in sweat suits—is the perfect foil for Katie Grinnan's chunky, freeform *Dreamcatcher* and *Hubcap Woman* sculptures. *Highway Junction*—by another ArtPace alum, Yutaka Sone—creates a tropical garden setting for two marble sculptures of big city "cloverleaves." The most searing eco-statement may be Rob Fischer's *Thirty Yards (Minor Tragedies)*, a see-through cargo trailer containing an agglomeration of chairs, planks, newspapers, a fish tank with gurgling rusty water, and assorted rubble. The off-putting mess gains poetry as the sole object in a gallery of photography.

The "Photography" Biennial—Katy Grinnan and Jack Pierson inject new ideas and energy into the posed portrait. Roni Horn's bird/boy/landscape images, mounted on stanchions and arranged in a haphazard panopticon, are fun to glance at from the corner of your eye as you move around the installation. Alec Soth's *Sleeping by the Mississippi* and Emily Jacir's *Where We Come From* are excellent series that reaffirm how well photography can capture experience and place—the first is a sharp, eccentric look at delta culture; the second a poignant

account of the problems moving back and forth across the Palestine/Israel border.

The "SPRING!!" Biennial—A welcome relief from this grueling New York winter. David Hockney's garden watercolors are bright and fun (if not particularly interesting). Dike Blair's hydrangea gouaches made my mouth water (and his lovely, low minimalist sculpture of painted wood and softly filtered fluorescent lights is a sophisticated complement to all that flowery beauty).

If there is still any doubt about the pervasive influence of the photographic image in contemporary practice one need only look at Jim Hodges's *Untitled (it's already happened)*—a 5-by-7 foot chromogenic image of a flowering tree intricately clipped and folded into a flurry of petal reliefs. Lastly, Craigie Horsfield's video installation, *El Hierro Conversation*, fills a quiet room with pale, misty visions of a lush, tropical mountainside and soft bird song—a good spot to nurse sensory (and winter) overload.

The "Sprocket Holes" Biennial—Film buffs will love hearing the whir of projectors at intervals throughout the exhibition. Included are the last hand painted films by Stan Brakhage and deadpan observational shorts by TJ Wilcox. In a pitch-black side gallery, Anthony McCall's film *Doubling Back* projects a circle that twists into parabolas and other shapes. A smoke machine creates just enough atmosphere to essentially make this image a twisting, 3-D cone that cuts across the room. Moving your body through these shifting planes must be what walking through walls feels like. It's a thrilling, not-to-miss experience.

And lastly, the "All Over the Wall" Biennial—You know what I'm talking about: big works with lots of parts that spread across a wall like a plague. In the context of a biennial, they can take your breath away...or suck the life out of you (a similar problem with the long slate of video and computer entries). This isn't a criticism...I just ran out of steam. Among these



FOREGROUND: Mark Handforth, *DiamondBrite*, 2004
Aluminum and reflective vinyl text
120 x 144 x 60 inches

BACKGROUND: Mark Handforth, *Western Sun*, 2004
Fluorescent lights with amber gels
Dimensions variable

shamefully slighted works are assume vivid astro focus' psychedelic, black-lit party room, Christian Holstad's "macramé and graffiti" mixed-media installation, Dave Muller's taxonomic history of pop music, Zak Smith's *Pictures of What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow* and, alas, Houstonian Santiago Cucullu's dense variegated vinyl wall work, *Untitled...the gestation of anarchism in the New World Shlarafenland*. I'll rest up and come back.

So much to digest...there always is...but this biennial was a delight to nibble slowly. Where you are asked to linger you are well repaid. I lingered for more than three well-spent hours (peeing and the munchies happily deferred for ART's sake).

John Ewing is a freelance writer and critic living in New York.