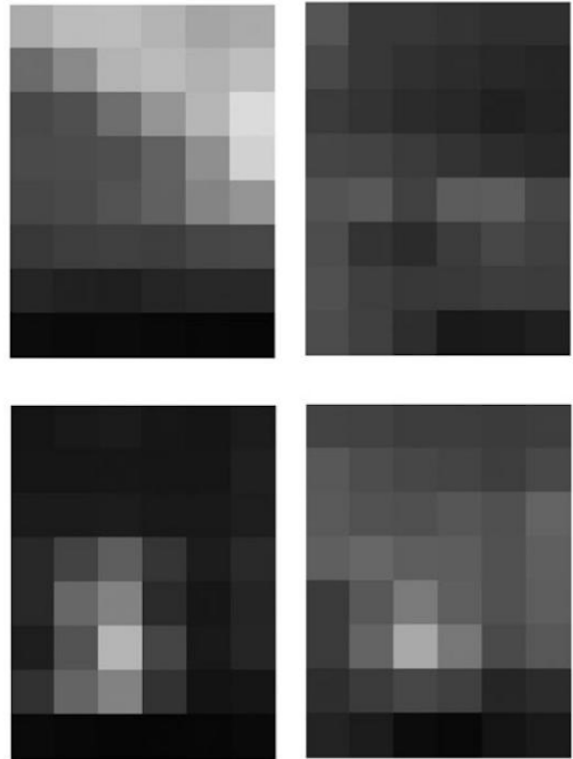




L. Lisa Sigal, *The Day before Yesterday and the Day after Tomorrow*, 2007; drywall, house paint, plaster, dimensions variable; collection of the artist
 R. Sherrie Levine, *After Stieglitz*, 2007 (details); eighteen inkjet prints; 19 x 13 inches each; collection of the artist; courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



NEW YORK

Whitney Biennial 2008
 Whitney Museum of American Art

The 2008 Whitney Biennial features 81 artists, fewer than in previous years, but it feels bigger and more frenetic than ever, with a plethora of artistic practices and many temporary projects and performance-art works spilling out into the Park Avenue Armory, radio broadcasts, film screenings, YouTube and other off-site venues. Despite this variety, there is a serious, sobering tone running through the floors of the museum set aside for the Biennial: this “theme” could be described as a culture gone to pieces and represented in fragments. But far from preachy, the works chosen (by the Whitney’s younger curators Henriette Huldisch and Shamim Momin) portray artists grappling with this fragmentation in interesting and honest ways.

If there was any guideline to the selection of these artists, it’s as if the curators were challenged to cleanse the palate of earlier, showier Biennials. There are absolutely NO front-page photo ops in the 2008 exhibition, which may go down as the least-photographed Biennial in history (a strange but marvelous badge of honor). Phoebe Washburn’s wooden “greenhouse” structure, where bulbs flower in terrariums amid golf balls and Gatorade, probably comes closest. But even this work has a messy, unsettling, decidedly unaesthetic quality (or lack of aesthetics, which is clearly THE aesthetic of the moment). Across the show, there are practically no pretty surfaces or art for pleasure’s sake (optical titillation or otherwise). Even Mary Heilmann’s colorful paintings, hanging in the coveted 2nd floor foyer as a welcome, play up the artist’s ersatz clumsiness and play into the exhibition’s overall theme.

On the museum’s ground floor, the exhibition starts (smartly) with the super-dumb *Grand Machine/THEAREOLA*, a show-stopping installation by the late Jason Rhoades. The messy “workshop” produces the artist’s

PEA-ROE-FOAM (a combination of peas, fish eggs, foam pellets and Elmer’s glue)—this unruly material is packaged in boxes emblazoned with the notorious Marilyn Chambers (shown in squeaky-clean Ivory Snow ads AND posters for the porn film *Behind the Green Door*, in which she appeared simultaneously in the early 1970s). With Rhoades as the ideal standard bearer, “dumbness” is depicted as a symptom of confusion or mania, maybe even trauma—an incapacity to synthesize meaning from a fragmented reality. This sensation of fragmentation speaks more to mental illness than the “moral decay” of the cultural wars, and it grows sharper, smarter and bleaker as one moves progressively upstairs.

On the 2nd floor, Rachel Harrison is given a room for a suite of 19 photographs of monuments, both grand and prosaic, sloppily painted over with colored accents. In the center is one of her signature papier-mâché sculptures, this one painted with a harlequin pattern and used as a stand for a video projection of Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean* intercut with footage of a street vendor hawking carrot peelers. Elsewhere, Michael Queenland presents three totemlike sculptures that breezily combine weirdly disparate elements—carved wooden bases stacked with aluminum buckets and brightly colored balloons cast in resin with protruding animal faces. Jedediah Caesar casts all manner of trash—woodchips, seed pods, ribbons, colored plastic, etc.—in urethane resin to make elegantly finished, rectangular slabs mounted on a gallery wall in a massive grid.

On the 3rd floor, fragmentation gets darker and more political. Omer Fast presents *The Casting*, a mesmerizing fictional video interview with an American soldier returned from Iraq. Projected on panels hanging in the middle of the darkened gallery, viewers can watch the soldier and



L. Omer Fast, production still from *The Casting*, 2007; 35 mm film transferred to video

R. Mitzi Pederson, *Untitled*, 2007; wood, string, wire, aluminum tape, bells; 65 x 48 x 9 inches; collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; James and Eileen Fund purchase



interviewer on one side, or switch to the other to see reenactments of the soldier's tale—a schizophrenic fusing of two unrelated stories: an encounter with a German teen and her family and an accidental roadside shooting of an Iraqi civilian. Daniel Joseph Martinez's *Divine Violence* fills a room with rows of gold-painted plaques decorated with the names of familiar organizations—Al Qaeda, Gestapo, Shining Path, Central Intelligence Agency, etc. In my favorite work in the exhibition, *The Day Before Yesterday and the Day After Tomorrow*, Lisa Sigal uses formalist strategies to fragment a room—broken sections of wall, distressed surfaces, inaccessible corridors and red-and-white stripes that boldly mark the space and other locations in the museum.

On the 4th, top floor of the Biennial, almost every work has a torn, rough, ripped or unfinished edge and incorporates reclaimed and found materials. These DIY works are spare and sophisticated in how they avoid being solely about materials and materiality to instead communicate the fragmentation of consumer culture, its marketable surfaces and economic mechanics. Ruben Ochoa does so with a large sculpture of concrete, wooden pallets and chain-link fence that poetically suggests a displaced fragment of urban street. Mitzi Pederson contributes two delicate works that are both hideous and lovely: one, a sheet of ripped wood paneling kept vertical with threads; and the other, an intricate arrangement of crumbled, black cinderblock dusted with glitter. Others suggest social fragmentation and disconnect, like pieces incorporating two-by-fours and house-framing techniques by Heather Rowe and William Cordova. These evocative works echo the national mortgage crisis, made sharper and more poignant with Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* nearby.

Perhaps to offset or balance the strong central theme that runs through the exhibition, the curators have thrown in some total “left fielders,” including art stars John Baldessari, Stephen Prina and Karen Kilimnik (a small room containing Kilimnik's tiny, fussy oil still lifes and a sparkling chandelier feels like a quick snort of something illicit to spur you on). Interestingly, two other established heavyweights, Louise Lawler and Sherrie Levine, feel wholly of a piece with the Biennial's prevailing vibe of fragmentation (i.e., Lawler's photo details of semi-empty art galleries in the limbo state of installation, and Levine's Stieglitz rip-offs blown up into pixels and her bronze “body masks”).

In a freakish coincidence, the “pleasure dome” of Takashi Murakami's retrospective going on simultaneously at the Brooklyn Museum of Art is the antithesis of the Biennial. Ironically, it's not in Manhattan, as if the city performed some massive borough brain swap. And the crowds have followed. That show across the river is nothing but visual pleasure, replete with photo ops. Museumgoers are turned into stealth paparazzi, sneaking around museum guards to snap shots on their cell phones. Unlike the 2008 Whitney Biennial, which reminds viewers of fissures and fragmentation in contemporary culture, the Murakami show makes you want to spend money—aesthetics stimulating the appetite to consume. Selling your soul (that is to say, buying something) never felt so heedless, so fun. Taken together, the two shows offer an unexpectedly broad view of the current moment in art.

John Ewing is a freelance writer and editor based in New York.