

ARTnews

SUMMER 1991

New York

WHITNEY BIENNIAL

Whitney Museum of American Art

Physically and thematically, the Whitney Biennial (through June 16) is a rambling, earthy, chaotic affair that spills over all four floors of the museum and embraces issues ranging from AIDS, racism, and sexual identity to nostalgia, abstraction, and the absurdities of art discourse. Yet, although it is bigger than ever, encompassing over 100 artists, it is also far more coherent than usual. This is partly the result of a far tighter organizational scheme, in which artists are arranged by generation. Perhaps even more important, the curators have largely avoided the usual pot pourri approach, instead allowing certain themes to be explored in depth. As a result, works (169 in all) begin to play off one another, gaining complexity from their associations.

Three generations of artists are presented here. The second floor is devoted to artists who emerged in the '50s and '60s; the third floor belongs to those who appeared in the '70s and '80s; and the fourth is filled with works by artists who gained visibility in the late '80s. The second floor, containing the works of long established artists like Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Joan Mitchell, and Philip Pearlstein, is the most decorous and contains little hint of the tumult that lurks above. Painting dominates this section of the show, ranging from the silvery delicacy of Pat Steir's recent waterfall paintings, to Chuck Close's mosaiclike portraits of artists April Gornik and William Wegman, to Joan Mitchell's luminous gestural abstractions. Sculpture is somewhat less happily represented by one of Frank Stella's overblown aluminum conglomerations and some rather peculiar Cy Twombly assemblages.

The third and fourth floors are far less tidy. Cutting across genres and incorporating materials as diverse as beer cans, sculpted wax, plastic bags, and human blood, the art here embraces an esthetic of impurity and irreverence. In contrast to much of the most celebrated work of the late '80s, which exuded an air of cool, inhuman perfection, many of the pieces have a homey, cobbled-together feel. A case in point is the rich disorder of Cady Noland's room installation. Resembling a chaotic repository of America's cultural

memory, it is scattered with low walls of beer cans, steel scaffolding, and aluminum cutouts, and transparent photoetchings of such American icons as Lee Harvey Oswald and Patty Hearst. Less successful is a massive construction by Jessica Stockholder that suggests a warehouse storeroom or theatrical backstage. On those few occasions when technology is invoked in this show, it is more comic than oppressive, as in McDermott and McGough's cleverly simulated Victorian photographs of scientific apparatus.

The most interesting work in this section of the show reflects an embrace of the messiness of contemporary life. One of the most persistent themes here, evoking at once the specter of AIDS and the emergence of pornography as a political issue, is the body. The applications of this theme are various and provocative. Many of the most powerful works—Mike Kelley's perversely comic coffins for "dead" dolls, David Wojnarowicz's image-text meditations on sexual desire in a time of plague, Kiki Smith's grisly waxwork human effigies, and Tim Rollins + K. O. S.'s blood-stained pages of Flaubert's *The Temptation of St. Anthony*—are overhung with the shadow of AIDS. Other works, such as Sally Mann's unsettling photographic images of not-so-innocent children or Rona Pondick's oversize mattress laced with a net of baby bottles are reminders of the latent sexuality of childhood. Meanwhile, in Mary Kelly's ruminations on the aging process or Lorna Simpson's photo-and-text explorations of black female identity, the body is a physical shell upon which others project their notions of our character.

In a more playful vein are a pair of contributions that suggest links between technology and the body. Vito Acconci's impressive *Convertible Clam Shelter*, giant shells hooked to a sound system that mixed ambient sound with spoken advertising, opens invitingly, as if promising a return to the womb. Meanwhile, the most striking newcomer, a young Californian named Alan Rath, contributed several humorous kinetic assemblages. *Voyeur II* resembles a

space probe with antennae sporting video images of shifting human eyes. Similarly, Rath's *Hound* joins a dog's body—created from a packing crate—with two bare TV tubes showing twitching human noses.

In this rambunctious company, the cool irony favored by the '80s superstars looks sterile and precious. David Salle's new paintings, in which images are layered over compositions that appear to be borrowed from Renaissance tapestries, no longer even have the shock value of pornography, while Peter Halley's Day-Glo geometric compositions look increasingly banal. Also oddly out of place is the smattering of works that explore painterly abstraction. Rebecca Purdum's atmospheric color studies, for instance, have a delicate beauty that is almost impossible to appreciate here.

The art world reflected in this biennial is at once socially conscious and self-involved. When it meditates on the evils of the world, it does so from a very personal perspective. Questions of mortality, sexuality, ethnic and racial identity press more heavily upon these artists than do the more distant horrors of war, poverty, homelessness, and ecological devastation. In fact, the only work that really attempts to evoke the larger political, economic, and social climate of our time is Group Material's *AIDS Timeline*. Occupying the Lobby Gallery, it is a rich collage of news clippings, magazine ads, videos of public service announcements and popular TV shows, artworks, and statistics that trace the nation's slow awakening to AIDS in the light of facts about U.S. military and social spending.

The Whitney Biennial is by definition a cumbersome, overambitious exhibition that raises expectations it can never hope to satisfy. Too often it ends up looking like a trade fair show of the current hot artists, in which individual works stand about forlornly like offerings in a department store. While not without flaws, this year's biennial was put together much more thoughtfully. It demonstrates that variety and inclusiveness are far less important for a show of this sort than is an overriding thematic continuity.

—Eleanor Heartney