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Seeing Out Loud: There's a Smart Show Struggling to Get Out of This Big, Bland Whitney Biennial

By Jerry Saltz



Sterling Ruby's ceramic sculptures are the best thing in the show.

If you want to get the most out of the 2014 Whitney Biennial, start on the fourth floor and spend most of your time there. This portion of the exhibition — there are three, each with its own curator — was organized by the Chicago artist-gallerist Michelle Grabner, and includes the show's visual and material high point: a central gallery crammed with colorful painting, sculpture, and handmade objects as well as ceramics and textiles. It's wildly overfilled, radiating heat and energy. The prehistoric-like wrecked giant ceramic ashtray-objects of Sterling Ruby are maybe my favorite objects in the show; I love the chaotically woven two-sided paintings of Dona Nelson, the glimmering chain-metal beaded-curtain adorned with antique tools by Joel Otterson, the material-poetry of the collaboration between Amy Sillman and Pam Lins. There are more than a few duds, and the usual buddy-buddy inclusions of friends and former students — everyone does that, not just Grabner — but if you wander through the rest of this floor, you'll find other artists well worth looking at.

And, apart from scattered pockets in the rest of the show, it's the last blast of visual and material juice that you'll get in this optically starved, aesthetically buttoned-up, pedantic biennial.

Much of the rest of the show is a nebulous tasting-menu mess that exudes an inert elegiac air. I kept hearing myself think, *I see dead art*: Work that looks and behaves like it is supposed to look and behave but that doesn't make us see differently, that doesn't rethink form, reimagine structure, or explore material, color, or new orders. You'll spend way too much time here reading long wall labels that explain what the work is supposed to be about. Never mind that Oscar Wilde said something like, "The moment that you think you know a work of art, it is dead to you." This reading-to-see is an extension of our highly educated class of artists and curators, an urge to ape the look of art, play by the rules, and be accepted by institutions. The result is a generic, noncommittal, straitlaced show.

There's something else. About 40 percent of the individual artists in this show are older or deceased. The average age of the artists in Grabner's salon-gallery is around 55. On the second floor (organized by Anthony Elms), the average age is around 50. Now, let me stipulate that newness, nowness, and nextness have nothing to do with age, or with the age at which an artist emerges. I wouldn't have a job if the art world weren't intensely cross-generational and

layered. (An artist can catch fire for the first time at age 90.) Yet such emphasis on older practitioners makes this biennial come off as a dodge, as if the curators were scared of making a wrong call. Or they haven't spent enough time in the trenches (as opposed to flying around the world participating in symposiums with like-minded curators), and have lost touch with what might be going on beyond what they already know. Right off the second-floor elevator entrance is a sculpture by Jimmie Durham, who was born in 1940. It was made in 1989! I've been told that it is the last work he exhibited in New York before he decamped to Europe. I like Durham's work enough but there's no reason he should be taking up this biennial slot — let alone with this work. Ditto the lovely notebooks by the late filmmaker Allan Sekula.

Careful correctness abounds. Hot young artists and market favorites and spectacles have been shunned. The show is peppered with collectives and collaborations. It isn't New York-centric, and it loves artists who've been in other biennials or who've already had museum surveys. Success is okay as long as it's not too financial or big. Rudolf Stingel created a mind-blowing installation in Venice last summer, but he'd never be included in a show like this. Nor would more unpredictable excellent younger talents like Andra Ursuta, Josh Kline, or Lucy Dodd. The show cries out for one of William Powhida's gigantic art-world-Babylon murals, maybe downstairs in the restaurant. The curators are so determined to stay pure, to avoid acknowledging the machinations of commerce, that the show is completely disconnected from the entire world.

Stuart Comer, who curates media and performance art at MoMA, opens his third-floor show with Dash Manley's trailer-scale walk-in wood and metal frame with large prints or something inside. Nearby is a large ridiculous video of the artist reenacting some scene from an early American film. The work is here because it checks all the boxes: It takes up a lot of space, is momentarily engaging, has video, references film, and comes with elaborate explanatory wall text. Whole Lower East Side galleries could fit in the space this washout takes up. Nearby is a very large gallery devoted to Semiotext(e), the publishers who introduced French poststructuralist theory to the U.S. I'll just say that I saw ten artists in galleries last month who would've been better and more relevant. Grrrrrr. Sigh.

The curators are also infatuated with the current institutional tic of display-mania: artists who act as curators, anthropologists, and archivists, mining eccentric informational territories. I adore this sort of idiosyncratic exploration. Yet so much of that art begins with fabulous raw information and then does barely anything to transform it. Here, Valerie Snobeck and Catherine Sullivan have “appropriated” the extraordinary collection of anthropologist George M. Foster, who in the 1960s gathered and annotated airline menus. Magical material! You just want to look at it! And then Snobeck and Sullivan turn it into a dead display of suitcases and prints supposedly about “disseminating subversive information” and how “immutable social systems might be re-engineered.” Ben Kinmont falls just as flat by asking museum visitors to send him a note with the time and date of a conversation they have at home. He will then make annotated records of the time and date of the first 100 notes. Absolutely by-the-book bland informational-conceptualism. These artists are unwilling or incapable of presenting information whole to yield its inherent power, or they fuss it up, turning everything into artsy little displays.

Though not everything. There’s a very good small show trapped in the body of this very big, bad Biennial. Exemplary in this regard, Zoe Leonard has turned one of the largest single galleries in the museum into a beautiful empty camera obscura, using the Whitney’s distinctive prismatic window as a lens. Here we see the world projected upside-down into the darkened space; traffic runs on the ceiling; building façades reach to the floor. In this reverberating quiet, one of the Whitney’s final uses of its unusual architecture before it moves downtown, we see the place where the real meets the power of the abstract.

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