



View of Bjarne Melgaard's installation *Think I'm Gonna Have a Baby* and (right wall) Travis Jeppesen's *16 Sculptures*, both 2014; at the Whitney Biennial.

# WHITNEY BIENNIAL 2014

New York—Whitney Museum of American Art

Is there such a thing as curatorial temperament? On the basis of the 2014 Whitney Biennial, the answer would have to be a qualified yes, or rather three stifled “yeahs.” The show sports an unlikely trio of curators, Michelle Grabner, Stuart Comer and Anthony Elms. Each was given a single floor of the Breuer building to manhandle. Given the preponderance of literary figures represented, this show may go down in history as “the writers’ biennial,” in that David Foster Wallace, Gary Indiana, Susan Howe, Etel Adnan and the independent press *Semiotext(e)* are each, somewhat paradoxically, included as artists.

Grabner’s fourth floor will be remembered as the show in which painting, particularly contemporary abstraction by women, adumbrated a comeback of gloppy, frequently scabrous materiality. Her installation has the greatest number of artists and the most saturated pileup of works. Grabner herself is an abstract painter as well as a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and the more-is-more approach of her floor is proffered in her catalogue essay as an instance of “curriculum building” rather than curating. (Her section of the catalogue is curiously the only one that includes interviews with the artists; these are a big plus, given the mostly impenetrable prose of the curators’ essays.)

At the nexus of the visual traffic jam, two of Dona Nelson’s two-sided abstractions project off the wall at an angle, recalling Renaissance polyptych wings that have been opened. Their stained, unlovely surfaces are loosely grid-

ded and punctured seemingly at random by rough, painted strings. The strings in turn play off an enormous multi-colored hanging fiber installation by Sheila Hicks, a veteran of the craft world and more recently a successful crossover to the contemporary art world. The muddy acrylic stains of Nelson’s work also resonate with the deep brown, almost scatological glazes of Sterling Ruby’s three oversize ceramic chargers from his “Basin Theology” series, which are filled with the shards of his own failed pieces.

Stuart Comer’s third floor is alternately brash and subdued. The taste of this former curator of film at Tate Modern, London, who recently became chief curator of media and performance art at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, runs to the Euro-transgressive. The Norwegian Bjarne Melgaard’s overstuffed, horror vacui installation is definitely the design scoop of this biennial, with its amazing neo-Salvador Dalí sofas in the shape of lips, pillows in the shape of penises, multiple hooked-rug collages climbing the walls, aggressive audio component and video footage of gorillas humping.

A more timeless repose is offered by the Beirut-born Adnan’s room, filled with School of Paris-style painted abstractions. At 89, Adnan, a renowned Arab-American writer, currently living between Sausalito, Calif., and Paris, almost steals the show with her quietness. Her nomadic life is highlighted in Comer’s catalogue essay, which harps on California as a new decentered model for cultural production.

ON VIEW  
THROUGH  
MAY 25

Anthony Elms, a youngish writer/curator who recently left Chicago for Philadelphia's Institute of Contemporary Art, trumps the other two curators with his poetic use of empty space. Zoe Leonard's installation is the tour de force of the show, a breathtakingly beautiful and hauntingly simple work. An entire gallery, replete with Breuer's signature trapezoidal window masked to contain a smallish lens, is repurposed as a working camera obscura you can wander through. It reproduces the view across Madison Avenue.

Kudos are in order for Elijah Burgher's fine-gauged colored-pencil drawings in Elms's second-floor installation. *Beacon to beacon (for R. Hawkins)*, 2013-14, depicts three nude men posing casually in a room against a blowup of Antonio Pollaiuolo's engraving *Battle of Naked Men* (ca. 1465); one of the men mimics the raised arm of one of the Renaissance warriors. Nearby, in a dark room, homoerotics dovetail with brilliant philosophizing in the wild 53-minute video *Rib Gets in the Way (Final Thoughts, Series Three)*, 2014, by Steve Reinke with Jessie Mott. The fact that these artists are friends from Chicago suggests a new hotbed of over-the-top comedic fatalism.

The real archeological discovery in Elms's show is Joseph Grigely's *The Gregory Battcock Archive, 2009-2014*. The archive was found by Grigely when it was about to be thrown out from a defunct storage facility in Jersey City, N.J. Battcock (1937-1980) was a well-known critic and anthologist and an important gadfly on the Pop and Minimal scenes, who was murdered at his home in Puerto Rico. Grigely carefully resurrects Battcock's nude Polaroid self-portraits, art-world memorabilia and typescript pages from his diary of sexual exploits in the '70s, which make for steamy reading. The resulting artwork is low-key, documentarian and riveting, as well as a melancholic reminder of how soon such figures are forgotten. Running into a colleague at the press preview, at a time when I'm pondering throwing out my own paper files from the 1970s and '80s, I found myself shouting, "Hang on to that archive!"

—Brooks Adams



René Daniëls: *Soft Stripes*, 1986, oil on canvas, 59¼ by 79 inches; at Metro Pictures.

## RENÉ DANIËLS

### Metro Pictures

René Daniëls is often described as a "cult" figure, an appropriately ambiguous honorific for the Dutch painter whose body of work from the mid-1980s has been hugely influential even if it has provided little grist for typical canonizing narratives. Just as the Velvet Underground's first record is said to have spawned a thousand garage bands, so, too, have Daniëls's cerebral, stylish canvases motivated a wide swath of contemporary experimentation. (Any number of Millennial artists from Bushwick and Sunset Park could have found kinship in this exhibition, a veritable retrospective of more than a dozen paintings plus a large selection of drawings, all from 1980 to 1987.)

The work's carefully tailored air of casualness, conveyed through loose brushwork and deceptively simple color schemes, seems designed to frustrate those in search of profound existential drama. And Daniëls's subject matter—gallery interiors, cartoonish vampires, bridges, books and bowties—hardly seems "critical" in the overt way that telegraphs artistic seriousness. He worked in a minor key that continues to resonate widely, in part, perhaps, because it lacks the pretentious trappings of self-consciously "major" artistic achievements.

As a description of this situation, "cult" feels intuitively right, but defining the term with some precision can help clarify the significance of Daniëls's work. For instance, he is definitely not a charismatic spiritual authoritarian of the sort who thrived in New York's Neo-Expressionist scene. Nor should the tragedy of the artist's personal life—a brain aneurysm in 1987 effectively ended Daniëls's career—shade the analysis of his work with devotional pieties. Daniëls's cult status might be more related to the obsessive appreciation of undervalued pop-culture artifacts, most importantly the cult movie. "Cult," according to film scholar Gregory Taylor, "attracts those enticed by high culture's aesthetics yet disaffected from its ideological values." Melding sophistication and irreverence, "cult" might describe both a mode of critical analysis and an approach to cultural production, one that is embodied in Daniëls's work but also shared by the likes of Philip Guston after 1969, the Talking Heads, Martin Kippenberger and perhaps the punk scene in general.

Daniëls was a master at balancing complexity and ambition with affected naiveté. His *Hoefijzerschilderij (Horseshoe Painting)*, 1982, depicts a crucifix-like highway intersection surrounded by floating horseshoes, a bizarre combination of landscape and common objects that's enticing enough to invite interpretation while deflecting sure meaning. The hazy, sketchy quality of one untitled painting from 1984, which features solid colored rectangles floating in an indeterminate space, appears like a tossed-off effort at geometric abstraction. But the work is, in fact, so intricately layered with grids and traces of erased lines that the composition must have developed out of a deliberate structure, a conjecture confirmed by a diagrammatic preliminary drawing placed alongside it in the exhibition.

Daniëls may be best known for paintings depicting simple architectural spaces that, rendered in perspective, look