

THE ART WORLD

GET WITH IT

The Whitney Biennial.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



The current Whitney Biennial will be remembered as the last at the noble Marcel Breuer building, on Madison Avenue, before the museum moves to its snazzy new quarters, designed by Renzo Piano, in the meatpacking district. But most of the art in the show will likely be remembered only in a general way, as expressing a frazzled, peculiarly melancholy Zeitgeist. Like the previous Biennial, this one isn't limited to American artists and to new works, but no other has so extended its range beyond the grave. Several of the artists are deceased, having died young, or relatively so. They include two distinguished but lesser-known Pictures Generation art-

ists, Sarah Charlesworth and Gretchen Bender, who died in 2013 and 2004, respectively; Tony Greene, a promising maker of pictures that impose painted, sensual patterns on tinted photographs of animals and male bodies, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1990; the documentarian Malachi Ritscher, who immolated himself in protest of the Iraq War, in 2006, and is memorialized by a group called Public Collectors; the flamboyant and influential art critic Gregory Battcock, who was murdered in 1980 (the case is unsolved), and is evoked in an installation by Joseph Grigely; the politically minded photographic artist and noted CalArts profes-

sor Allan Sekula, who died of cancer last year; and the great writer David Foster Wallace, who committed suicide in 2008, and is represented by notes for his last, unfinished novel, "The Pale King." The presence of these individuals gives this Biennial an air of vigilant self-consciousness and uncertain bearings.

The show, presenting works by a hundred and three participants, has been organized by three guest curators, each with his or her own floor. (That's a novelty, which suggests either praiseworthy openness or a wish to spread around the critical rancor that routinely befalls Whitney Biennials.) Start on the fourth floor, which is, by far, the most visually appealing—it's practically buoyant. The curator here is Michelle Grabner, a painter and conceptual artist who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and at Yale. She has selected assertive works by mid-career female abstract painters of established reputation: Louise Fishman, Jacqueline Humphries, Suzanne McClelland, Dona Nelson, and Amy Sillman. They affirm the lately revived confidence and vigor of painterly abstraction, which is thanks, in part, no doubt, to encouragement from the hungry contemporary-art market. Grabner also favors things whose chief reason for being is shameless splendor, such as a vast curtain of slim metal chains, spangled with costume jewels and weighted with antique hand tools, by Joel Otterson; and a hanging cascade of colored cords by the veteran fabric artist Sheila Hicks. Especially ravishing is a shelf crowded with elegant ceramics by Shio Kusaka, a Japanese potter living in Los Angeles, who inflects traditional forms with subtle, idiosyncratic imperfections. Seemingly aware of a backward crouch in her fondness for soulful craft, Grabner elegiacally invokes Wallace's struggle to reanimate literary fiction, with pages from a notebook that has on its cover the image of a winsome kitten.

Be warned that the other floors are not as viewer-friendly. Prepare to consult explanatory wall texts. Stuart Comer, the chief curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art, and Anthony Elms, an associate curator at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art, thrill to the esoteric, in works by artists who virtuously resist the art world's prevailing values of

Works by Joel Otterson, Sheila Hicks, and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung.

commerce and spectacle. That sounds like a good thing, but the results can strain a person's patience. The curators' shared impulse smacks of passive aggressiveness, either withholding or gingerly ironizing aesthetic pleasure. Even Charline von Heyl, an abstract painter of abundant zest and charm, appears glum, as Elms has chosen to represent her with a wall of thirty-six puritanically black-white-and-gray combinations of painting, drawing, and collage. (The pictures' impacted energies impress, though, given time.) Comer keynotes the third floor with pleasant abstract paintings and foldout, doodled books by Etel Adnan, who is eighty-nine and seems valued more for her cosmopolitan biography—in locales from war-torn Beirut to Paris and Sausalito—than for her artistic achievement.

But, if you admire artists whose forte is a matter of attitude, you may come away from the show with a newfound enthusiasm: perhaps the photographic team of Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, who picture their attractive, transsexual selves in and out of both humor and their clothes; or a mash-up installation of Early American images and objects, reproduced in mediums including 3-D printing, by editors of the adventurous online magazine *Triple Canopy*. Elms earns some good will by borrowing space on the fourth floor for the always provocative Zoe Leonard, who has turned it into a colossal camera obscura, projecting the buildings across the street onto the walls, upside down, via a lens set in the museum's cockeyed front window. Comer likewise ingratiates with a fantastic projected video by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, members of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, an experimental group of anthropologists and artists at Harvard. They dragged cameras from a fishing boat through turbulent North Atlantic waters and hoisted them aloft into flocks of seagulls. I could happily have watched the video for its full eighty-seven minutes. But even those seductive offerings evince a hermetic condition, in much recent art, which I'll term the Age of Practices.

The word "practice" pops up as a leitmotif throughout the show's densely texted catalogue. We used to speak of what artists do as their art or their work

or, tangentially, their style, vocation, discipline, allegiance, or passion. But now all is practice, with a sense of discrete, professional enterprise. In a way, the fashionable usage recalls the rage for academic critical theory that dominated highbrow art and art talk during the nineteen-eighties and nineties. A subsequent, general rejection of that brainy orientation remains tied to it as a shift of emphasis in the formula "theory and practice." A practice presumably speaks for itself, in a community of practitioners, like those with nameplates in an office complex of doctors or lawyers. The connotation is both absurd and sort of touching. It tenderly dissembles the Darwinian contest for precedence that has always been endemic, and exciting, to the art world. In the Biennial, only Grabner's abstract-painting women feel engaged in healthy competition, challenging one another's notions of what a painting should be and do. Elsewhere, it's pretty much just one damned or, occasionally, blessed thing after another.

The three curators write, in a collaborative introduction to the catalogue, "If there is any central point of cohesion, it may be the slipperiness of authorship that threads through each of our programs." That's only too true, Grabner's section somewhat aside. They continue, "In many ways, it has simply become inefficient to slow down and figure out who is responsible for a specific idea or action, opening up interesting areas of collaboration." Now, is any word more reliably predictive of boredom than "interesting," when applied to a creative endeavor? And what, in contemplating art, is laudable about "efficiency" and reprehensible about a willingness "to slow down"? The speed of developments in the current culture, along with the tendency to group-think, poses problems that aren't solved by aping them, in a rushing blur of "slippery authorship." That said, at least acknowledging those conditions may mark an inevitable and necessary phase for emerging artists—few of whom, in the Biennial, appear terribly happy about it.

The show's tributes to the dead seem telling. It's as if only dying could decisively counter today's unholy momentum, with its pressures to get with this or that program. Death suspends practice. ♦

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