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ART REVIEW

*Narratives Snagged On  
the Cutting Edge*

By **Michael Kimmelman**

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BEFORE its last biennial, the Whitney Museum of American Art trumpeted the names of the artists to be included, and the pre-show hoopla caused the predictable grousing. So this time around, the names were treated for months like state secrets, which also provoked grousing: the Whitney was acting like the Pentagon.

Well, no one would mistake this biennial for the unveiling of the Stealth bomber, though it is a dud. I had hoped for better. The state of art at the moment is low-voltage, so perhaps it was wrong to have expected a high-voltage show about the work of the last two years. But there were reasons to believe that this biennial would be different from the last couple, less preachy than '93, more germane than '95.

Good works are in it. They always are in biennials, if you hunt for them. Yet too much of what's here, even by artists who have looked strong elsewhere, seems tepid or tired or out of context. Unfamiliar artists mostly turn out to be unremarkable. The mix of fashionable and unfamiliar names seems calculated to appease insider tastes, which may partly account for why, despite its occasional inspired moments, the show also feels clinical rather than serendipitous.

With 200 works by 70 artists, including film makers, the exhibition is smaller than some other biennials. Many artists get their own rooms. This is good in principal, often logistically obligatory, but it has the effect of isolating works from one another. The cacophony of

jostling objects in the last biennial at least provoked far-flung connections.

This is also intended to be a more tendentious biennial than the previous one, and it is, though they're all bazaars. Each biennial adopts buzz words the way Vogue prints "fresh" on its cover to describe the spring fashions. For the previous biennial "metaphor" and "sensuousness" were bruited about, and this time "narrative" and "uncanniness" are among the words used by Louise Neri and Lisa Phillips, the two curators, in the show's catalogue. Their essay, constructed as a dialogue, includes this exchange:

Ms. Neri: "What is so great about all these artists is that they are really pushing the limits not only of perception but of the existential question: 'What am I doing here?' "

Ms. Phillips: "Well, that may be one of the big questions for the end of the century."

Plato this is not. Still, narrative and uncanniness are plausible thematic descriptions, if any apply, because many of the works do involve the unfolding of elaborate personal stories -- strange, often ambiguous mixtures of fact and fiction -- and the expression of various private obsessions, what the curators call "cosmologies."

Given that memoirs and biographies have become fashionable, perhaps there's a larger cultural trend reflected here. Certainly, in the absence of a dominant movement in art, the each-artist-is-his-own-subject ethos you find throughout the show is an illustration of the present balkanized situation.

A world unto itself, for instance, is Chris Burden's "Pizza City," a giant urban and exurban model: dizzyingly obsessive, part lower Manhattan, part Swiss mountain village. I've seen the work before, laid out as a wedge, a slice of pizza, which heightens its intensity and eccentric order in a way the helter-skelter layout here doesn't. But the general idea comes across: Mr. Burden packs together tiny oil refineries, shipyards, an airport, suburbs, rocky outcroppings with a windmill and castle, and a dense cluster of skyscrapers that form a downtown area like the one in the movie "Blade Runner." It's "Blade Runner" by F. A. O. Schwarz.

Matthew Ritchie's paintings and drawings, based on his own inscrutable cosmological system, a Blakean fantasy in rococo style, has a different appeal, more cerebral. So do Antonio Martorell's sewn maps, which are modest cosmologies and touching; and Francesco Clemente's pastels, sensual and surreal. It's a relief to come upon an artist here who cares about touch and color.

Maybe the most conspicuous aspect of the biennial is the surrealism that Mr. Clemente's art exemplifies. Elsewhere this surrealism is less fantastical, more about what's odd in the everyday, or making the everyday look odd. There are Philip-Lorca diCorcia's big color photographs of crowded city streets illuminated by a portentous light; Jennifer Pastor's outsized cornstalks and seashells, and Glen Seator's full-size reconstruction of the Whitney director's modular office, tilted 45 degrees so that you feel queasy just peering through its door. It is the show's coup-de-theatre, surreal Minimalism.

Surrealism isn't news: the last biennial had a more pungent dose of it, with works by artists like Matthew Barney and Greer Lankton. Perhaps this explains why such artists here as Charles Long, with one of his usual sci-fi meets Holiday Inn installations, and Tony Oursler of the funny talking-heads video projections look as though they're spinning their wheels. They may not be biennial regulars, but their work has been regularly shown elsewhere. Likewise, Louise Bourgeois's sculptures come off, unfortunately, as predictable.

Biennials are in a bind. They strive to satisfy conflicting audiences, insiders and first-time viewers of new art. Years ago, big surveys like this one, the Venice Biennale, even Documenta in Germany, essentially became anachronisms: with so many art publications and traveling shows, the art community didn't need them to find out what was going on. The public did, but proliferating sources of information also revealed just how skewed the surveys had always been.

This did not mean that expectations for the shows diminished, only that they became, generally speaking, doomed. Everyone still wanted somebody else to make sense of the endemic disorder of the art scene, which, as in politics and love, really meant confirmation of what they themselves already believed. And since the surveys were, with few exceptions, multi-ring circuses too chaotic to satisfy any single taste, no one would be satisfied, except perhaps the artists included, and often they weren't, either.

The disappointment in this case is not that the biennial fails to describe what's going on, but, in a sense, that it does so too faithfully. It is as if the curators wanted to guarantee that they would not recapitulate the eccentricities of the last two biennials, and ended up with an impersonal survey, dutiful and official. Yet one wants to be surprised, unsettled, swept away, even outraged at a biennial.

So, you settle for offbeat and quiet satisfactions where you can find them. Shahzia Sikander's intricate watercolors, for instance, are self-reflective variations on Persian miniatures, and Wendy Ewald's collection of photographs of children, though documentary, looks dreamy and unexpectedly fresh.

A different satisfaction comes from Aaron Rose's abstracted landscape photographs, beautifully printed, and Bruce Conner's inkblot drawings, akin to Chinese scrolls. You can tell that Ms. Phillips was an organizer of the recent Beat exhibition at the Whitney, because her biennial not only features artists like Mr. Conner, but also inclines toward the sort of assemblage art, made out of recycled materials, that several of the so-called Beat artists favored.

Those materials include recycled film and video clips. I can't remember the last time the words psychedelic and mellow popped into my mind so frequently, but they did, among other occasions, during the films by Mr. Conner, Ken Jacobs (a hypnotic montage of a silent classic, "The Georgetown Loop"), Roman Anikushin and Bob Paris (a similar use of Hitchcock's "Birds") and Burt Barr (who shows a turtle for 9 minutes and 48 seconds, in coma-inducing slow motion).

The films and videos are more integrated with the rest of the biennial than usual, and quirkier than much of it. David Hammons's short video of a man kicking a bucket down a street is a wry dirge. William Forsythe, the dancer, performs a solo of herky-jerky movements, like semaphores, which, filmed in black and white and shown in an art context, can vaguely bring to mind Franz Kline's angular calligraphic paintings. Fudging the boundaries between the arts is not a bad idea, though you can wonder what motivated the curators in Mr. Forsythe's case, since his work refers to the formal possibilities of dance, not art. Still, I was engaged.

Those two videos belong to the uncanny category. Other films deal with narrative in elaborate biographical, autobiographical and documentary forms that nonetheless are at arm's length from reality. Some of these works just fall flat, like Shashwati Talukdar's "My Life as a Poster." But the better examples include Cheryl Dunye's savvy "Watermelon Woman," a collaboration with Zoe Leonard about a fictional black actress, and Abigail Child's slow, simmering, oddly sweet "B/Side," which meditates on life in the slums. It's interesting how multiculturalism, once hectoring and self-consciously didactic, as in the 1993 biennial, has evolved: now everyone has a story to tell, and the art is, or isn't, in the telling, which is how it should be.

Ilya Kabakov has been telling his story about the Soviet Union forever, it seems. And why not? For the biennial, he concocts the ward of a decrepit hospital for old people, a nest of small rooms where narrated slide projections recall various lives, including the artist's: nostalgia to resuscitate the dying.

His installation is not easy to see when the Whitney is crowded, because the rooms are small and the work demands time and silence. But like the best art by nonconformists in the former Soviet Union, it recognizes the complex legacy of having lived under an oppressive

regime: how private dreams can blend with harsh political realities to produce bittersweet memories. Mr. Kabakov's work is about the importance, both political and emotional, of remembering. In a disappointing biennial, it doesn't disappoint.

The 1997 Whitney Biennial Exhibition is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street. The film and video exhibits close on June 8. Artworks remain on the fourth floor through June 1; on the lower level, through June 8, and on the second and third floors through June 15. The biennial is sponsored by Beck's.

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