

Whitney Biennial 2008

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART AND PARK AVENUE
ARMORY, NEW YORK, USA



Javier Téllez, *Letter on the Blind For the Use of Those Who See* (2007)

Unlike the 2006 iteration, the latest Whitney Biennial did not have a title or an explicit theme. What it had were talking points. Before the opening curators Shamim Momin and Henriette Huldisch made their way through the press, spreading the word: the word – borrowed from Samuel Beckett – was ‘lessness’. This was supposed to be a tentative, uncertain show, reflecting tentative, uncertain times. Unpromisingly, the idea of ‘lowered expectations’ was bandied about. Such talk of ephemerality and anti-spectacle made the biennial sound like it would be a sequel to the reopened New Museum’s recent exhibition ‘Unmonumental’. Yet despite a couple of overlapping artists and a shared fondness for raw plywood, the two had little in common. The sombre, earnest tone at the Whitney seemed worlds away from the busy, slacker-y New Museum show.

First impressions were rather dire: an initial scan revealed a studied avoidance of anything too extravagant or eye-catching. Colour and mood were equally muted. Immediate visual

pleasure took a back seat to elaborate backstories, spelt out in comically stilted artspeak on wall labels. Paradoxically, the works that openly made claims for attention, that flaunted their modesty the loudest, were the easiest to ignore. Ruben Ochoa's concrete and rebar construction, for all its agreeable, rough-hewn bravura, felt, in such a setting, as though it was doing little more than parading its own civic virtue (If I had a rebar for ever time someone tried to mold me, 2007). Jedediah Caesar's blocks and slices of resin-cast detritus (Dry Stock, 2007) were simply inert: too much povera, not enough arte.

Caesar provided one of several glaring examples of an all-too-popular, all-too-formulaic, artistic strategy: call it maculated Minimalism, if you need a catch-phrase. Basically, you quote some spare icon of art-historical purity, then fuck it up, formally or conceptually, adding on incongruous content or unexpected materials. There's something rather weaselly about this posture, playing teacher's pet and bad boy at the same time. In that vein Joe Bradley's primary-colour canvases assembled into Lego-man shapes at least had the virtue of goofy humour, but Patrick Hill's half-hearted mash-up of hard-edged forms and stained pink cloth felt pre-digested, corporate.

Yet this biennial rewarded sustained attention, revealing its idiosyncrasies over time. The most fascinating work concerned itself with people and places rather than things. Odd little pockets of elsewhere lurked within the galleries, recesses where more private languages were spoken. Given a room of their own (complete with white-noise machines), Matthew Brannon's cool, sophisticated graphic prints buzzed with furtive urban discontents, like spending time eavesdropping at a swanky hotel bar. Various quasi-theatrical environments were set off into dedicated spaces; particularly compelling were Lisa Sigal's melancholy alcove of architectural salvage (The Day before Yesterday and the Day after Tomorrow, 2007) and Matt Mullican's baffling Surrealist research centre (Mullican Under Hypnosis, 2007). Crowds queued up to enter Mika Rottenberg's installation Cheese – a Brothers Grimm-weird reconstruction of

an other-worldly dairy farm.

The generally excellent video and film offerings were similarly dedicated to bringing back visions from parts unknown, invented and actual. Tour guides and talking heads abounded. Stanya Kahn's off-kilter performance as a mysteriously logorrhoeic Los Angeles valkyrie was the focus of *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out* (2006), made with Harry Dodge; equally hilarious commentary was provided by the maniacally cheerful star of Olaf Breuning's demented travelogue *Home 2* (2007) – something like Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005) remade with hapless natives replacing bears. Both suggested a possible new influence seeping into the art world: the babbling-into-a-camera YouTube vernacular.

Decidedly more solemn was Javier Téllez' gorgeous film *Letter on the Blind For the Use of Those Who See* (2007), a moving document with an elegant conceit: six blind people confront an elephant, just as in the parable. Another report from the darkness, *When the Levees Broke* (2006), Spike Lee's monumental documentary on post-Katrina New Orleans, was a sharp, wise inclusion – although conventional in form, it seemed to pull the disparate threads of the biennial together, giving oblique political frustrations real and direct expression.

The 'other voices, other rooms' motif continued at the Park Avenue Armory – which served, for the show's first month, as a satellite location. In theory it was a brilliant choice, but in practice it was a terribly wasted opportunity. The cavernous, dilapidated building itself – a bizarrely eclectic 19th-century folly – could overwhelm the most powerful art work. As it happened, the Armory housed some of the weakest pieces, mostly half-hearted attempts at site-specificity. At best, they clashed with the decaying grandeur of their surroundings; more often they simply disappeared. But this annexe served primarily as the staging area for performances and projects – the kind of things that fall under the rubric of 'relational aesthetics'. (A concern with community and social networks was a stated part of the curators' brief.) This

was the 'fun' component of the biennial: you could drink home-made tequila at a home-made bar, be given therapy inside a white cube, have your portrait done in 15 minutes, attend a 'gypsy-themed feast'. You could, that is, if you showed up at the right hour, got on the right list or, more efficiently, were a friend of the artist or an art-world insider. Critics have previously questioned just who is relating to whom in these sorts of makeshift carnivalesque activities. Events at the Armory did little to dispel such scepticism. They proved that, even in a time of lowered expectations, what you can expect usually depends on who you know.

Steven Stern

http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/whitney_biennial_2008/