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## When Cool Turns Cold

**The Whitney Biennial, chockablock with bloodless M.F.A. product, is a little too smart for its own good.**

By Jerry Saltz



*Down Thirst, the Juice Broke Loose (the Birth of a Soda Shop)* (2008), at the Whitney. Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art

At the Whitney, 2008 is the year of the Art School Biennial. Not because the art in the new Biennial is immature or because the artists all went to art school—although I bet they did—but because it centers on a very narrow slice of highly educated artistic activity and features a lot of very thought-out, extremely self-conscious, carefully pieced-together installations, sculpture, and earnestly political art. These works often resemble architectural fragments, customized found objects, ersatz modernist monuments, Home Depot displays, graphic design, or magazine layouts, and the resultant assemblage-college aesthetic, while compelling in the hands of some, is completely beholden to ideas taught in hip academies. It's the style du jour right now. (It also promises to become really annoying in the not too distant future, but that's another column.)

Perhaps the show is so inclined toward the current art-school moment because its curators, Henriette Huldish, 36, and Shamim M. Momin, 34, were in part selected for their youth. I was thrilled that the Whitney was prepared to give itself over to young curators. No sooner had they been named, however, than Whitney director Adam Weinberg pulled back the reins, announcing that the two would be "overseen" by the museum's chief curator, Donna De Salvo, and that they'd "worked with" the advisers Thelma Golden, Bill Horrigan, and Linda Norden. If you're going to entrust young curators with your signature show, you ought to give them enough rope to do it. (Plus enough time: Huldish and Momin had all of thirteen months to pull this show together.)

But never mind the institutional politics. Like many young curators, Huldish and Momin are more cerebral than they are visual, and this show feels very, very controlled. The art and its presentation are orderly and methodical. Viewed over time and on repeated visits, the works develop interesting interrelated cross-conversations. But the circumspectness and consistency mean there are few moments that stop you in your tracks, confuse, delight, set your nerves on end, or provide moments of "What is this?" There's little that's overtly sexual, shocking, angry, colorful, traditionally beautiful or decorative, almost no madness or chaos. The show doesn't alchemically add up to more than the sum of its parts.

Huldish and Momin assert that current art is exploring what Samuel Beckett called "lessness," and that it's in a "do-over" phase. Huldish writes that artists are working in modes of "anti-spectacle" and "ephemerality," and employing "modest, found, or scavenged materials." Momin adds that the do-over

“creates an unfixed arena of past possibilities,” and that artists “think viral, act viral.” I’m not sure what that means, but it may be her curatorspeak way of saying that artists are working together and off one another, and that they’re making use of the open-source systems, self-replicating strategies, and decentralized networks of our YouTube-MySpace world. These things are changing the look of art, and of cattle calls like the Biennial.

Or they’re starting to, anyway. It’s clear the curators only have eyes for installation, sculpture, and video. There are 81 artists in this show, only seven of them painters by my count. Four of them—Olivier Mosset, Robert Bechtle, Mary Heilmann, and Karen Kilimnik—have been lauded for years. The youngest painter, Joe Bradley, 32, contributes three works that are boring, puckered versions of Ellsworth Kelly. These curators seem to think that painting is incapable of addressing the issues of our time or that it’s passé. I suspect Momin and Huldisch didn’t want to include painting at all. Although that kind of academic orthodoxy is moth-eaten—a medium has potential until the ideas it addresses are exhausted—it’s a shame they didn’t go all the way with that notion. A No Paintings Biennial would’ve at least made everyone hysterical.

On the upside, Momin and Huldisch should be congratulated for mounting a thoughtful show that, while academic, is neither dogmatic (painting/photography notwithstanding) nor sprawling (recent biennials have been crammed with over 100 artists) nor sexist (about 40 percent of the artists are women, which may be a Biennial record). Critics have already called this show both pro-market and anti-market. It’s neither, and it takes the position that most artists take: The market isn’t the point.

Given that the consistency of the show means that the art tends to blend together, the things that stand out do so because of qualities like color, scale, or outright oddness, rather than for their preapproved art-world signifiers. For me a striking moment came in **Mika Rottenberg’s** dilapidated installation that looks like a beaver dam or wooden shack. Inside, video images depict women with fetishistically long hair (one is reportedly a porn star who does nothing but wave her hair at men; who knew?). These women reach into the earth, milk goats, and make cheese. Rottenberg’s palette, sound, materials, and timing combine to make something like an animal language of images. You don’t know whether to think about grooming, barnyards, the means of production, or mythic beings’ doing bizarre things. This lets you escape the art-world conventionality of so much of the show. Phoebe Washburn takes a similar chance in her sprawling sculpture/termite tower/ greenhouse. It has its own irrigation system of Gatorade pumped into aquariums that grow flowers in tanks of golf balls. Like Rottenberg’s, Washburn’s art throws viewers “don’t ask” visual curveballs.



*Cheese* (2007–2008).

Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art

This kind of caught-napping relish dawned on me in front of Cheney Thompson's almost-monochromes that are meticulously painted patterns that are themselves hard to identify. It's a welcome change to be lowered into the trapdoors of perception this way. Those doors crack open as well in Jedediah Caesar's Larry Bell-meets-Donald Judd-meets-Lynda Benglis block of iridescent Styrofoam—another work with an unpredictable surface and hard-to-determine reasoning.

That kind of engaging strangeness is at work in the best films and videos on view. It becomes tragic in Omer Fast's outstanding dual-screened projection of an American soldier recounting stories of dating a German girl and his accidental killing of an Iraqi civilian. We see the relationship and the shooting reenacted on separate screens, blending together. A death has rarely seemed more pointless; the end of empire, so sad. This sadness turns outlaw in Natalia Almada's *Al Otro Lado* (To the Other Side), a stunning 66-minute work documenting the Mexican music known as *corrido*, a style that has gone from telling stories of troubadours to recounting tales of drug-runners and "coyotes"; as one musician bitterly sings, "I didn't cross the border; the border crossed me." A subtler rupture permeates Amie Siegel's excellent exploration of the former East Germany.

The three most effective films in the show are the craziest. In them you sense humanity tugging on the bit, mired in uncontrolled emotions. These are Coco Fusco's indoctrination into the interrogation techniques of the U.S. military; Olaf Breuning's treatise on hapless American ecotourism; and Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's wild woman walking around L.A. with Viking horns on her head and a hunk of fake cheese under her arm.

The best chance viewers have of escaping the art-school gravity is to see the show in reverse. Start by visiting the performances and installations at the glorious Armory on Park Avenue. And go at night (the place is pretty empty during the day). It's possible that the looser and more experimental atmosphere, the hanging out, the free tequila, and the amazing architecture will give your experience a boost. So far, among others, I've seen outstanding performances by the legendary "loser" Michael Smith in which he dressed in a baby diaper and interacted with audience members, Gang Gang Dance playing a twenty-minute set of tribalistic trance music from behind a huge mirror, and, best of all, Marina Rosenfeld's Teenage Lontano, in which she had 40 teenagers from New York public schools stand in a long line as they sang the vocal section of György Ligeti's 1967 *Lontano*, a piece of modernist music from the 2001: *A Space Odyssey* era. Watching this piece, I felt the opening of a portal between a failed utopian past and the possibility that the more real present is already something to love. I was transported.

This show comes at a restless, discontented moment. Institutional critique has become an institutional style, and the socioartistic movement known as "relational aesthetics"—that is, art that's all about your own relationship to being in public with it—has gone mainstream. Most in the art world want more than that. They're longing for art to be more than just a commodity or a comment on art history. They yearn for a less quantifiable, more vulnerable essence, perhaps what Lawrence Weiner called, "the eternal little surprise of Well, is it art?" I still have faith in Momin and Huldisch, but while some of the art in their biennial has this essence, much of it simply looks like what art looks like these days.

The Whitney Biennial  
The Whitney Museum of American Art.  
Through June 1.