

Why This Year's Whitney Biennial Should Be Seen Through a (Slightly) Rose-Colored Lens

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There's an anecdote I try to remember every time I get too down on New York and its coddled, flighty art world. One afternoon over lunch, I unburdened myself of months' worth of negativity to the painter Chuck Close, a brilliant artist who has spent the last quarter of a century partying inside a wheelchair. After sympathetically hearing me out, he picked up his glass of wine with both hands, took a sip, and gave me a patient smile.

"Christian," he said, "You know how some people say they are folks who see the world as a glass half full and others as a glass half empty?" I nodded.

"Well, even in the worst of times, and despite some very low points, I've always been a glass-three-quarters-full person. Sometimes I don't know if there isn't something wrong with me."

After recovering from my embarrassment, I assured him that there was absolutely nothing wrong. Looking back now, I realize that viewing the glass as three-quarters full has turned into an elusive but important personal goal.

Now, bear with me. After a year in which your correspondent has been especially critical of the global Ponzi scheme involving very expensive art, it has also become necessary, I believe, to identify glimmers of originality and resistance to art world corruption and reasonably support them where they exist. Seen in this light, the Whitney Biennial 2014 appears to be a glass-three-quarters-full-type exhibition. There's plenty to dislike about this wildly uneven, often frustrating selection of alternative American art. But after a couple of visits, I'm convinced that this version of "the show everyone loves to hate" — it has long presented a feckless parade of in-crowd and market favorites — deserves an extra dose of optimism, or at least the benefit of the doubt.

A last hurrah at the old Marcel Breuer ziggurat before the Whitney goes full bridge-and-tunnel in the Meatpacking District, this year's model boasts a distinct layer cake structure, with loads of schlag on top of the flakier crumb. A product of the museum's decision to turn over the biennial to a trio of outside curators, the survey stacks up like three individual displays housed on separate floors of the Whitney's trademark building. To the degree that these independent shows share similar themes, this is due mostly to a joint foreign bias. Because the exhibition's organizers live or have recently lived outside of New York — Stuart Comer in London, Anthony Elms in Philadelphia, and Michelle Grabner in Chicago — the Whitney Biennial 2014 reflects an essential parallel-universe view of American art as seen from outside Manhattan's grossly blinged-up, tin-eared echo chamber.

That two of the curators, Elms and Grabner, are also artists adds further quirks to the show's salutary strangeness. Other general traits worth noting: Most of the exhibition's 103 artists hail from outside of the five boroughs (New York has 50 artists in the exhibition, L.A. 19, and Chicago's much livelier scene 17), and there are only a few examples of anything that could pass for trophy art (namely, Sterling Ruby's oversize ceramic ashtrays and Jacqueline Humphries's reflective metallic paintings). Also of interest: The single show that the catalog describes as "three biennials under one roof" skews much older than previous iterations. Consider that as many as 40 percent of the participating artists are dead or over 50, the latter being far more career-killing. This seems appropriate at a time when there is nothing more conservative than youth culture. Given art's current magnet-like pull on image-conscious hip-hop artists, social network wunderkinds, and Rip van With-Its, this potential virtue will probably still upset certain folks who obsessively cling to puerile countercultures, photogenic undergrounds, and new bohémias.

Provided maturity, intelligence, and complex artistic vision is what you're after, you're in luck, so long as you take the elevator directly to the fourth floor and Grabner's exhibition. By far the most sophisticated and complete of the "three biennials," this pedagogue's installation (she teaches at the Art Institute of Chicago) not only contains about half the show's artists, it also encompasses a working curriculum for what she has elegantly termed "the waywardness of contemporary art." Among the escape-cum-vacations featured on Grabner's floor are Ken Lum's Vietnam War-inspired commercial-sign sculpture, Dan Walsh's optically dazzling geometric abstractions, Jennifer Bornstein's muscular video of naked women wrestling, and David Diao's painting-as-critique of auction-house shenanigans. Realistic politics flow subtly but insistently throughout Grabner's cussedly ecumenical view of art in America. The proof: The first and last thing you see on the fourth floor is Dawoud Bey's 2008 confident candidate portrait of Barack

Obama.

It's a steep drop from the fourth to the third floor, and an even scarier one from the third to the second, yet there are rewards to be found in each of the show's strata. Stuart Comer's third floor, for instance, contains Bjarne Melgaard's romper room of televisionary ecological disaster and violence, Triple Canopy's enlightening installation about the shifting meanings of deaccessioned art, and Keith Mayerson's salon-style hang of earnestly realistic paintings. Does Comer, MOMA's new curator of media and performance art, get carried away by a professional attachment to the written word? He most certainly does, as the presence of dryly démodé French theory publishers Semiotext(e) proves. But this is still a show about basic premises. The takeaway: Not all ideas are created equal, especially in an exhibition trying vintage and newfangled notions on for size.

Similar problems trickle down to Anthony Elms's second-floor encounter with old and new approaches to organizing this cluster-freak of an exhibition. Like on the other floors, the viral curatorial tic of presenting piles of archival contents as content makes an unimpressive appearance in an area devoted to artist Joseph Grigely's display of critic Gregory Battcock's ephemera, but then, remarkably, sparks fire in a second pack-rat installation by Chicago's Public Collectors (aka artist Marc Fischer). A room full of recordings, photos, artifacts, and a briefcase that once belonged to Midwest antiwar protester Malachi Ritscher, its items are wholly transformed by wall text that identifies Ritscher as the martyr who publicly immolated himself in opposition to the Iraq war in 2006.

As Grabner put it, this is not a show (or shows) about "talent hunting," but about the hard work of making art in an impoverished creative ecology that rewards surface over depth, the easy over the hard-won, the affectless over the affecting, and the facile over the dedicated. An exhibition that tries to change the subject from branded art lifestyles to lives lived for and through art, it finds its most perfect expression in Tony Tasset's multicolored 80-foot shipping container memorial (located offsite at Hudson River Park). Titled simply Artists Monument, it lists the names, as culled from the web, of the world's known 392,486 modern and contemporary artists. That's a powerful community to reflect on — and more than enough reason to keep the glass, mine or anyone else's, at a steady three-quarters full.