

Issue 53 June-August 2000 

Whitney Biennial 2000

THE WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK, USA

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First published in
Issue 53, June-August
2000by *Kristin M. Jones*

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The results of Whitney director Maxwell Anderson's decision to enlist a team of six curators to organise this biennial of American art were predictably uneven. Mulling over the show's considerable weaknesses and strengths invited fantasies of a more radical approach. The project might have worked better if the organisers weren't privy to each other's selections - a greater number of surprising choices might have been included. As for the curators' rather disingenuous claims regarding the show's 'internationalism' (thanks to the 'nomadism' of so many artists today), why not take the logical step and open the show to artists living in South and Central America? The equation of 'American' with the United States is already problematic to many who hail from the rest of the Americas. Unfortunately one was left with the impression that the organisers were striving to avoid controversy as much as they were aiming for diversity.

Despite numerous bizarre inclusions and exclusions, the show contained a number of compelling pieces, many involving video, such as Shirin Neshat's tour-de-force, Rapture (1999), and Doug Aitken's series of laser-disc projections, Electric Earth (1999). Though radically dissimilar in scale, Paul Pfeiffer's digital video loop displayed on a tiny monitor, Fragments of a Crucifixion (After Francis Bacon) (1999) - an image of a basketball player staggering and grimacing amid a nimbus of sparkling flashbulbs - was equally mesmerising. A smaller discovery, a meditative video

by cinematographer Arthur Jafa, seemed too subtle to hold up in the muddled context of the exhibition. Although the overall vibe was low-key, the more dramatic pieces were more likely to garner attention.

Unlike these and other provocative and varied video works, most of the painting (as with much of the sculpture) was stunningly mediocre, so much so that it felt as if the curators had gone out of their way to prove that the turn of the millennium found the medium stone-cold. An exception was Ingrid Calame's huge sheet of Mylar covered with opaque vermilion 'stains' b-b-b, rr-gR-UF!, b-b-b (1999), but it suffered from being juxtaposed with less assured works. Photography, on the other hand, appeared to have slipped almost completely off the radar, leaving behind only a couple of interesting contributions from Sharon Lockhart, and a memorable piece from Vik Muniz' 'Pictures of Chocolate' series. Muniz is one of several artists in the show who were born in South America but now live in New York; in his work - as in a seductive installation by Leandro Erlich - one can detect echoes of the rich tradition of Brazilian conceptualism.

In their collaborative catalogue statement, the curators refer to the film and video works screened separately in the cinema program as 'more traditional', an imprecise description given that on average the 27 entries were more provocative, critically resonant and fully realised than many of the works in the rest of the show. This disparity has a lot to do with the fact that most of these artists are working on the cultural margins, with little prospect of critical or financial reward. It would be hard to locate a strategy, for example, in Sadie Benning's *Flat is Beautiful* (1998), an intimate yet grittily textured portrait of adolescent confusion, shot in Pixelvision and Super-8.

Similarly, many of the artists featured elsewhere would do well to emulate the haunting conceptual simplicity that distinguishes Elisabeth Subrin's *Shulie* (1997), a shot-by-shot remake of a 1967 documentary on the then very young feminist Shulamith Firestone, author of *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970). Subrin's film was not the only work to unsettle preconceptions about the nature of documentary; others included Jem Cohen's *Instrument* (1999), made with the band Fugazi, and *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs* (1999), Walid Ra'ad's examination of the Lebanese civil wars through a series of elliptical conundrums and fictional events. Also notable were *Multiple Barbie* (1998), a Pixelvision short in which Super-8 performance pioneer Joe Gibbons plies the plastic bombshell with psychotropic drugs, and Craig Baldwin's sardonic and brilliantly edited sci-fi allegory *Spectres of the Spectrum* (1999), crafted from a dizzying array of found footage. The persistence of the artisanal mode in experimental filmmaking, meanwhile, was reaffirmed by Nathaniel Dorsky's radiantly composed *Variations* (1992-98).

This Whitney Biennial has been trumpeted as the first to incorporate Internet art, but the several, largely dispiriting, Web projects included (except for one by the renegade collective [®]™ark were disappointing given the medium's expressive possibilities. In viewing Annette Weintraub's over-designed portrait *Sampling Broadway* (1999), for example, one yearns for what Vivian Sobchak recently described as the 'temporal nostalgia and spatial mystery' of QuickTime movies. Despite the

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introduction of Net art and the show's futuristic logo design, the 'millennial biennial' seemed to arrive as uneventfully as the new century. In the skillful manipulation of filmed and digital imagery, however, the future was quietly but dramatically present.

Kristin M. Jones

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