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One Last Dance in the Old Place

2014 Whitney Biennial Has New Faces and Interesting Choices

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For its 2014 Biennial, the last before taking the plunge downtown, the Whitney went a little wild with the recipe. It picked three curators from outside the museum and outside New York. (One just recently arrived.) It gave each of them free rein on a floor in the museum's Breuer building to work solo, with no cross talk required, though, of course, there was some, and some space sharing, too.

The result is a large, three-tiered cake of a show, mostly vanilla, but laced with threads of darker, sharper flavor, and with a lot of frosting on top.

For a long time, almost any biennial concoction the Whitney came up with was critically squashed. That tradition seems to have ended with the 2002 show, when the attacks were so ferocious that a lot of people began to back off.

And the shape of the art world was starting to change. It was growing hugely bigger. There was just more of everything: more artists, more galleries, more things. Postmodern pluralism, which for two decades had made conservatives crazy, was turning out to be their best friend. It diluted political thinking and encouraged easy-on-the-eye luxe. Much of this year's Biennial fits without resistance into the city's concurrent art fair week. That's the way things are.

Within this anodyne context, the show's organizers — Stuart Comer, chief curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art; Anthony Elms, an artist and associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia; and Michelle Grabner, also an artist and professor of painting and drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago — have made some interesting choices, pulled in some new faces and shaped three quite different shows.

If you want to go straight for frosting, head to Ms. Grabner's installation on the fourth floor, which has by far the most artists — about half the show's total count of just over 100 — along with the biggest objects and the brightest colors. In an interview, Ms. Grabner said forthrightly that she did not take her primary mission to be the tracking down of young talent. She mostly chose artists in mid- or mid-late career, many of them women. Good idea.

Several are painters — Louise Fishman, Jacqueline Humphries, Dona Nelson, Amy Sillman, Molly Zuckerman-Hartung — who work in variations on gestural abstraction. Their work is hung together in one gallery, which may not have been the best move. In the enclosed space, so many energy-generating pictures short-circuit one another a bit.

Still, it's an impressive display of formal chops, though I come to it with a handicap. I find Abstract Expressionism, a historical style referenced here, overrated and pretentious, a bore. Why would anyone want to bother with it, except maybe to do some constructive damage, which is the option that Ms. Nelson and Ms. Zuckerman-Hartung, in interestingly unalike ways, seem to take: Ms. Zuckerman-Hartung slices up the canvas (or, in her case, a dropcloth); Ms. Nelson messes up the surface with applications of ratty-looking, driplike skeins of paint-soaked cheesecloth.

In general, Modernism — recycled, retooled, whatever — hangs like a mist over the fourth floor, particularly over ceramics that might as easily date from 70 years ago as from today. So it's tonic to encounter an inky storm cloud of a vinyl-and-neon wall piece called "People in Pain," made in 1988 by Gretchen Bender (1951-2004) and restored ("remade" is the term on the wall label) by Philip Vanderhyden this year.

A cheerful Pop sign sculpture by Ken Lum embedded with references to the Vietnam War is half obscured by overcrowding. But three smallish paintings by the Chicagoan Philip Hanson, quoting Blake and Dickinson, are lovingly displayed. They're directly across from a case of handwritten notes made by the novelist David Foster Wallace for a book left unfinished at the time of his 2008 suicide.

Their presence seems to come out of nowhere, but it's smart, a wake-up injection of not-art (or maybe-art) into an installation heavy with art with a capital A. Dawoud Bey's studio portrait of Barack Obama placed, with perfectly inscrutable intent, right up front serves a similar purpose.

Painting and language are also basic ingredients of Mr. Comer's smaller, sparer third-floor show. And right off the bat, he introduces us to a virtuoso of both: the Lebanese-American writer and painter Etel Adnan, now 89, whose accordion-fold notebooks, dating to the 1960s, combine diarylike accounts of violence and near-abstract poetry with horizontally extendable watercolor landscapes.

Mr. Comer also gives us a chance to revisit the California artist Channa Horwitz (1932-2013), who made a memorable impression at the recent Venice Biennale with ultrarefined geometric drawings that suggest stitch work and genetic coding, and functioned as a form of dance or performance notation.

A lot of what Mr. Comer's installation is about is the phenomenon of mixing, how everyone's doing everything. Morgan Fisher makes film, paintings and sculptures that are also architecture. Kevin Beasley's sculptures are products of his performance. The irrepressible Jacolby Satterwhite combines voguing, martial arts and contemporary dance in video animations in which he is the main performer.

Within Mr. Comer's installation, as in the Biennial as a whole, artists are curators. At his invitation, the painter Richard Hawkins and the photographer Catherine Opie have organized a mini-retrospective of paintings-on-photographs by an art school classmate, Tony Greene, who died of AIDS in 1990 at 35. Tributes to the dead — there are several in this Biennial, including, by default, one to Terry Adkins, who died just weeks ago — have a ripple effect: Most of Greene's lavish, petite paintings are, in essence, valentines and prayers sent out to friends disappeared.

They are also, of course, inherently political statements, and in a Biennial damningly mum about politics, it is bracing to find work that isn't. Photographs of, and by, Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, a transgender couple, put queer consciousness on the front burner, and work by the California photographer Fred Lonidier stands as a beacon of dedicated activism. Starting in the 1970s, Mr. Lonidier documented the lives of immigrant laborers on both sides of the United States/Mexican border. Rather than exhibit his pictures in galleries, he showed them in shopping malls, union halls and tractor-trailers. He got in trouble, got censored, but kept keeping on. God bless him.

The bottommost layer of the biennial cake, Mr. Elms's installation on the second floor, is the thinnest in numbers and, at first bite, the least sweet. But it has some of the work I liked best. A piece at the entrance by Jimmie Durham — Native American by descent, in self-exile from the United States since 1987 — was a good omen. His abstract but roughly humanoid sculpture called "Choose Any Three" is made of stacked wood chips inscribed with names: Vanzetti, E. Zapata; Crazy Horse; Ho Chi Minh, Cristóbal Colón, Johnny Colón, Kay Starr, Malcolm X, etc. Mix and match and create your own political meaning for the piece.

This is also sort of the general method underlying Mr. Elms's show, which reveals itself slowly. You spot an LP playing on a turntable, but there's no sound. You listen closer, and maybe there is: a kind of audible vacuum, moving air. The recording was made on Sept. 11 and 12, 2001, by Matt Hanner, a member of the collective Academy Records. He lived under a flight path near a Chicago airport. When planes were grounded after the news of the Sept. 11 attacks, he taped the extraordinary silence.

An installation by Public Collectors, a Chicago group founded by Marc Fischer in 2007, is also about preserving sounds: hundreds of live experimental music performances taped over many years by Malachi Ritscher, a Chicago jazz fanatic and political activist who publicly immolated himself in 2006 as a protest against the war in Iraq. Thanks to Public Collectors, which functions as a custodian of cultural materials that no one, including museums, wants, Ritscher's life's work survives, including the briefcases in which he carried equipment, which are here.

The Biennial contribution from Joseph Grigely is a similar act of salvage. Some 20 years ago, in an abandoned factory in Jersey City, he found a cache of manuscripts and photographs that had once belonged to Gregory Battcock, the art critic and artist. Battcock, a ubiquitous and influential figure in the New York art world during the 1960s and '70s, was murdered in Puerto Rico in 1980. After years of research, Mr. Grigely has pieced together an archive of this complex and personable writer's life. The selection in the show is riveting.

And the archive isn't all reading; there are plenty of visuals, as there are throughout Mr. Elms's low-fat exhibition. You have to return to the fourth floor, to a space he borrowed from Ms. Grabner, to see Zoe Leonard's crepuscular camera obscura view of the street outside the Whitney.

But back down on 2, he's offering a dreamboat of a video called "The Beautiful One Has Come," by Dave McKenzie; a suite of tiny collage-poems by Susan Howe; Elijah Burgher's colored pencil drawing of three nude males, posed in front of Antonio del Pollaiuolo's 15th-century treatment of the same theme; and a handful of pocket-size notebooks with cartoonlike watercolors by the Conceptualist Allan Sekula.

The notebooks were a surprise to me, and they are certainly of interest. But their inclusion points to a major flaw in this biennial. Sekula, who died last year, was one of the most incisive, persistent and underrated political artists America produced after World War II. For some four decades, through texts and photographs, he critically documented the everyday realities of American classism and economic inequality. He worked within the art world: He was a revered teacher but stayed clear of its fads and foolishness. His major life's work is fundamentally un-art-fair art.

But his notebook drawings have relatively little to do with his major work, and everything to do, at least in the distorting context of this show, with the present market taste for cash-and-carry neatness, craftsiness-as-quality and political content as a kind of sweet-and-sour flavor enhancer. Despite some good work assembled for this Biennial by three bright curators, I left feeling pretty much the way I do when I leave an art fair, full but empty, tired of dessert, hungry for a sustained and sustaining meal.

The 2014 Whitney Biennial continues through May 25 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; 212-570-3600, whitney.org. A version of this review appears in print on March 7, 2014, on page C25 of the New York edition with the headline: One Last Dance in the Old Place.