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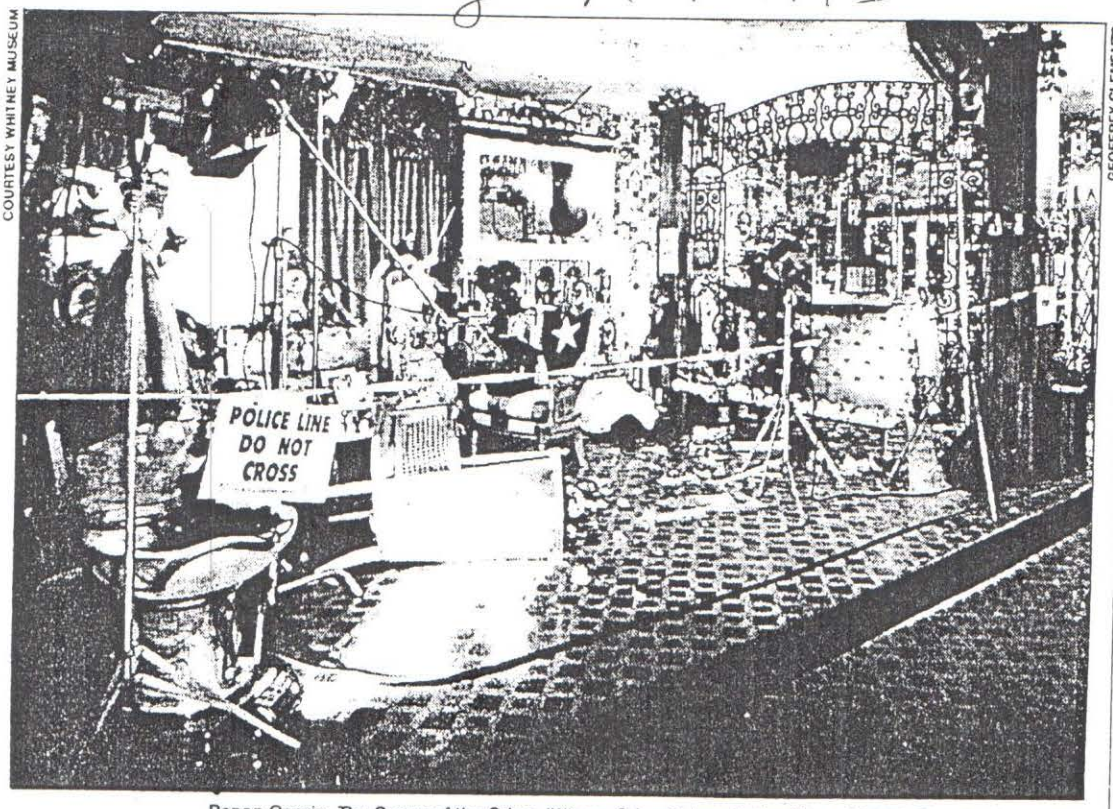


COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM

GEOFFREY CLEMENTS

Pepon Osorio The Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?) Installation View of "1993 Biennial Exhibition"

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS

Robert C. Morgan

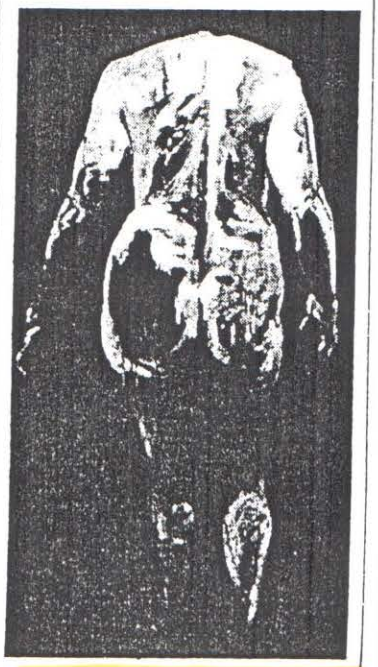
To dissect the recent 1993 Whitney Biennial exhibition at this point would be somewhat superfluous; the groundwork has already been laid. The bastions of cultural investment have already been drawn—antagonized, provoked, and usurped by various conflicting (conflicted) interest. That the Biennial of the present year is a disaster zone symptomatic of the discursive art world crisis is no great secret.

The rupture of aesthetic and critical credibility that began in the late 70s has steadily fallen into decline and collapse. What the art historian Arnold Hauser once revealed as "the sociology of art" has been misused and misappropriated over and over again. Hauser was clear about the limitations of sociology. Social science could not replace aesthetic interpretation or any other level of experiential undertaking. Now we have an exhibition—if not, the harbinger of a "new" museum program—devoted to a misuse of the sociology of art, the statistical revolution of an endgame aesthetic. Beyond the formal—or, for that matter, the formalist—the current exhibition proffers the cool content of institutionalized marginality.

No Go Po Mo

Postmodernism has finally lost itself, lost its own method. It no longer functions in order to deconstruct the language of art; instead, it has become ossified, frozen in place, without any movement, with no place to go. Postmodernism in art has become its own relic. The signs have hardened without their lingering referents. What Roman Jacobson once referred to as "the aesthetic project" is disappearing from view.

Rather than a survey of current American art, the Whitney Biennial has opted for the world of the spectacle, the world of fashion and political sublimations. Truly, I liked the Pepon Osorio and the Fred Wilson installations, even though they were more about cultural anthropology than they were about art. Speaking of cultural anthropoplgy, this is where the exhbition fell short—by not understanding the difference between social science (again, Hauser) and aesthetic quality. The curatorial assumption seemed intent on proving that aesthetic pretentions derived from the "dominant discourse" have disappeared, vanished from historical memory. Now is the time to bask in this new loss of faith with politically-minded art—art that illustrates a point, rather than provokes a resonance of profoundly-felt ideas. Rather than making a true survey of American art, we are given a heavy-handed theme show.



Joan Semmel from *Overlays* Series, 1992, o/c 68x78"

Gross Packaging

If the curatorial desire was to be multicultural—that is, to address various legitimate concerns representing "the Other"—it would seem that the gross packaging of the resulting spectacle became inappropriate. It could have been avoided in favor of a more subtle, streetwise exhibition. If the selection process had been truly multicultural the subliminal issue of class difference would have been made overt, rather than disguised in relation to concerns of race, gender, and sexual preference—many of which appeared to have emanated from highly privileged sources. If multicultural politics were really the issue at the 1993 Whitney Biennial, the exhibition would have appeared truly unaffiliated as opposed to connected with the same old PoMo discourse supporting the same old marketing system of display, hyperbole, and mindless investment.

Soho Shows

The Joan Semmel show at the "Bypass Gallery"—a made-up name for the second floor space at 578 Broadway—was a tour de force of feminist-oriented content by a mature figurative painter. The overlay paintings, shown in the front room, of lovers' bodies painted in the early 70s, deploy recent depictions of aging bodies with considerable delicacy and force—advancing the notion that painting is still a vehicle of powerful and evocative expression. The series of paintings of women in locker rooms was a voyeuristic experience revealing traces of temporality and intimate perusal of the female body.

The Richard Serra construction at the downtown Gagosian gallery is one of his best works to date. It is a masterful bending of space through the density of massive steel plates that tilt through the gallery. It represents a concept of monumentality—one that allows the viewer to particpate in the power of its signification, a consciousness expanding manipulation of space-time without regression toward the pre-modern.

Marjorie Strider's abstract paintings at Andre Zarre are her best in recent years, and one of the more engaging abstract painting shows this season in Soho. It is a show that defies the art school art with its slick look of professionalism that has by now become "international." Instead, her new paintings promote a visual intrigue and vigorous obsessiveness in the material process of painting. Borrowing from Pop as opposed to formalism, it still managed to project itself into the realm of a highly sophisticated decorum.

The Jay De Feo show at Nicole Klagsburn is a testament to how painting can appear when it is divested of external pressures and discourse—all the attributes that the Whitney Biennial manages to sustain. De Feo was a member of the San Francisco Renaissance group in the 1950s and had a remarkable influence on an entire generation of Bay area artists, film-makers and poets. Her paintings are deeply internalized expressions that avoid the formalist legacy concurrent in New York at the time. It is a small, but important show—a sign of hope amid the regressions uptown.