

FRED TORRES COLLABORATIONS

527 W 29TH ST, NEW YORK, NY 10001 T212.244.5074 F212.244.5075 FREDTORRES.COM

Published February 25, 2010

www.artinfo.com



Hooray for Whitneywood



Copyright Patrick McMullen

Guests at the 2010 Whitney Biennial's opening party waiting on line for the downstairs bar.

By Sarah Douglas, Andrew M. Goldstein

NEW YORK— The **Whitney Biennial** opening. What more can be said? On the one hand, rain. On the other hand, [Val Kilmer](#).

Let's explore this stark polarity. First, rain. The rain during Tuesday night's opening party meant that the coat check conundrum, faced just inside the door by everyone from the lowliest art dealer to the highest-level trustee, was all the more fraught. Should you check your soaked coat and tour the art in comfort and dignity? (No one wants to be the wet person, sloshing through the crowd. There were a lot of expensive outfits involved.) But then you'd risk spending the entire night on the interminable line, as many forlorn souls seemed to do. So wet coats were the uniform of the evening, for the less frequently photographed attendees at least. But were spirits dampened? No! An atmosphere somewhere approaching glee pervaded the opening, with art-world attendees slowly allowing themselves to marvel at a bracing array of fresh work and inspired curatorial choices (among the sundry misfires).

And let's look at the bright side, brightened by neon glow of celebrity wattage. Val Kilmer was there! A relative newcomer to the celeb art circuit, he was first spotted standing at the threshold of the museum, looking a bit tentative as the skeptical guard took in his long hair and matured physique before finally recognizing him. ("Right this way, Mr. Kilmer."). The actor then coolly disappeared into the scrum, the first of an influx of stars including Rosario Dawson, Michael Stipe, Chloe Sevigny, and Leelee Sobieski. But the real celebrities, as we remember from Rob Pruitt's Art Awards last year, were the artists and art-world power players rubbing elbows amid the works: Jeffrey Deitch, the **Rubells**, Okwui Enwezor, **Gabriel Orozco**, Gavin Brown, Andrea Rosen, **Elizabeth Dee**, and **Carol Greene** among them.

At the Whitney's subterranean bar, the obligatory first stop of the evening, art adviser extraordinaire Maynard Monrow spoke for everyone on hand when he said he "needed a drink. It's a mob scene!" Biennial artist Ari Marcopoulous was there with a crowd gathered around him, blinged out in a turquoise sports jersey with his name emblazoned on the back. Was it so people would know who he was? No, said a member of his posse, "He's wearing it so that he remembers who he is." It was going to be a long night.

Enough drinking, chatting, and people watching—on to the galleries! Making one's way up to the fourth floor required patience, especially when marching behind a figure like Enwezor, the highly esteemed globetrotting academic, for whom the stairway became a de facto receiving line. (It didn't hurt that he's a natural to follow **Francesco Bonami**, who organized the Biennial with young Whitney associate curator Gary Carrion-Murayari, as the anchor curator for 2012.)

Upon reaching the entry point, however, the show burst into view with a bang: the first artwork, an enormous and unexpected tapestry by Piotr Uklanski that resembled a cross between a burlap sack, an **El Anatsui**, and a **Rauschenberg** stage set, had many guests at hello. The high bar was sustained on the top floor by stellar rooms by **R.H. Quaytman** (our vote for the **Bucksbaum** prize), **Stephanie Sinclair** (harrowing, hot, and

claustrophobic photos of self-immolation victims in Afghanistan, intensified by the dropped gallery ceiling), then a scattering of excellent paintings and videos on the floors below. A full review will follow, so for the time being let's get back to the matter occupying most party-goers attention: gossip, slidelong quips, and career maneuvering.

A prominent dealer: "A well spent hour here takes care of six months worth of phone calls."

One well-known dealer to a famous artist: "You got dumped? I got dumped too! It sucks."

Young collector Josh Adler: "I like that there are fewer artists, and each of them gets to have more space." (This year there are only 55 artists in the show, down from 81 the last time around.)

303 Gallery director **Mari Spirito**: "Absurd, banal, and a punch in the stomach — it's perfect!"

Artist Orly Genger (who's opening an ambitious exhibition at **MASS MoCA** on April 24): "It's difficult to see work out of context, and I prefer to see more context rather than individual works. It's hard to randomly see a piece, especially when you are not familiar with the artist's work."

She's got a point. Quieter work, like **Josephine Meckseper's** gorgeous video and the bleached-out photos of **Curtis Mann** (a Biennial discovery), kind of gets lost in the thrum of these events. Maybe that's why so many people were clustered around the **Bruce High Quality Foundation's** room-size installation of a white hearse playing a 70s-style protest video on its windshield — it was a good place to publicly and overtly be seen looking at an artwork, instead of just at each other. But those paying attention would notice that political work spanned the show (which may have been a cause for bemusement to **Elizabeth Sussman**, curator of the 1993 Biennial, which was slammed for its political concentration) and that Op art nods were also in effect, from Quaytman to **Tauba Auerbach** (whose black-and-white paintings were presided over by the always-dapper Mr. Deitch).

By the end of the evening, the line back into the Whitney's basement bar had stretched up a stairway and roped around the museum's lobby, like the security line at Lagaardia on a bad day. Downstairs, one individual said that he had waited in a line stretching down 75th street just to get in the door of the Biennial, then waited in another line (presumably for the coat check), then waited in a third line to get down to the bar, where he planned to spend the rest of the night. The art could wait for a second visit.

And what about the after parties? Night-cap events were spread throughout the city, some hosted by artists and the main one held in **Tommy Hilfiger's** new midtown flagship store. Recaps of the openings events flowed freely—along with martinis—at the **Carlyle**, where **Bemelmans Bar** became the informal clubhouse for no small number of art-world figures. Followed by a top-secret midnight preview of the "Knock Knock, Who's There, That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore" exhibition at **Armand Bartos** gallery (in collaboration with downtown gallery Fred Torres) it was a reminder that no matter how many celebrities enter the art scene, the real glamour remains in an engagement with the best art and the ideas contained within it. The Biennial—again, amid its disappointments (what were they thinking with **Babette Mangolte's** room?)—furnished an abundance of both.