



WEEKEND UPDATE

by Walter Robinson

March 11, 2008

As much as a sedentary life is a safer one, it does sometimes pay to go out rather than stay in, and so it was on Saturday for the several dozen art lovers who braved the pouring rain for a brunch at Gering & López Gallery in the Crown Building on Fifth Avenue. The occasion was a show of new works by the British artist Jane Simpson (b. 1965), who is celebrated for sculptures that involve casting antiques in rubber as well as for taking ornamental objects like chandeliers and banisters and connecting them to refrigeration units, so that the items become covered with a dense layer of white frost.

For this effect, the moisture is drawn from the surrounding air. Too many hot-blooded onlookers can overwhelm the mechanism, the artist explained, which makes the otherwise inert objects emotional. A centerpiece at Gering & López is a sculpture consisting of an old Singer sewing machine, whose insides have been replaced by a small refrigeration unit, giving the black machine a cold white coating. A strip of reflective plastic, one side cut with a bit of decorative scrollwork, sits on top of the sewing table, a bobbin hanging from a length of thread at its tip like bait on a fishing pole.

"I think of it as a marriage of two different technologies," Simpson said. "The sewing machine is female." The masculine energy, then, leaves our lady cold? Though it resembles that famous Surrealist trope, "a chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella," Simpson's sculpture -- titled *A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing* (and priced at \$50,000) -- is in fact inspired by an Arthur Dove collage at the Metropolitan Museum.

Most of the other works in the show feature restrained arrangements of three or four things -- varnished wooden spheres, pitchers covered with latex, a gaily painted Happy Buddha -- presented behind glass in boxes on the wall, like Joseph Cornell updated for the 21st century. The largest piece in the show, *The Dresser*, is a black-painted cabinet filled with various plates and pitchers, also blackened, as if family heirlooms presented some sullen dark force.

The dresser piece reminded me of an exhibition at Gering & López last fall, a selection of seven elaborate cabinets crafted by John F. Simon Jr. to house and present his custom-designed computer codes -- something utterly abstract -- that manifest as ever-changing, tumbling abstract patterns on LCD screens. Suggesting Mid-Century Moderne, the cabinets are multicolored and inscribed with elaborate, laser-cut decorations. What's more, each cabinet represents a different chakra, and embodies a specific kind of energy.

As someone who came of age during the Conceptual Art era, my first impulse was that all the additional meanings that Simon had layered onto his "pure" code were extraneous. "Everything is code," the artist explained. "And there are lots and lots of codes." He won me over when he added the one inspiration for his cabinets were the "home entertainment centers" that now house digital content within our analog living rooms and dens.

The high design of Simon's work is very much in line with the sensibility animating the 2008 Whitney Biennial, which is about décor more than anything else. Everything in the show is shiny or polychromed or naturalistically textured, impeccably laid out and neatly aligned; even the art that resembles construction detritus is arranged like a Zen garden.



Jane Simpson
A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing
2008
Gering & López Gallery



Jane Simpson



Jane Simpson
The Dresser
2007
Gering & López Gallery

At the biennial press preview, the art journalist David d'Arcy called it the "Crate and Barrel Biennial," not in the sense that the exhibition is filled with mass-produced furniture and housewares, but rather that it reflects the kind of "good taste" that is represented by the flourishing of things like the New York Times' T Magazine and the migration of "luxe" design to low-cost outlets like Target. In Clement Greenberg's time, this sort of thing was called "kitsch."

The oddball work in the show is a pin-up photograph by Roe Ethridge, whose nicely framed color photos may well have some gnomic significance but that are more easily understood as essays in color, like pictures by William Christenberry or Stephen Shore. This particular photo by Ethridge shows a brunette model wearing a captain's cap and a heart-patterned bikini, making one of those coy gestures with a strap, as if to unite it. She does seem rather young and rather thin, though.

The 2008 Whitney Biennial is all the more interesting for its through-the-looking-glass similarity to the New Museum's "Unmonumental," originally a show of "junk sculpture" by two dozen artists that is now complete with collages on the walls and sound pieces by additional participants (it looks much better with all the components combined). The exhibition is a notable exercise in irony, considering the museum's location on the Bowery, one of lower New York's trashier neighborhoods. In fact, the new building itself is a veritable monument to irony, comically resembling a supersized metallic version of the irregular stacks of cardboard boxes seen on the curb at trash pickup time.

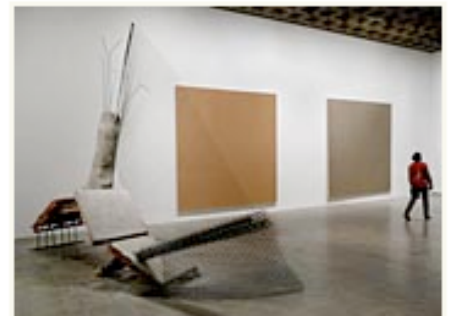
Inside, museum visitors find themselves complicit in this ridiculous enterprise, as they are invited to bring their esthetic discrimination to bear on artworks that literally look like various kinds of junk. Not only do we get to appreciate anti-art, we are tutored in its various and sundry categories. John Bock's doodled little sculptures made from cast-off household packaging are relics of an antic social commentary, for instance, while Carol Bove's restrained arrangements of threadbare thrift-store finds are strangely semiotic. Other congeries of crap are formalist (Anselm Reyle), antiesthetic (Rachel Harrison, Isa Genzken), anti-ethnic (Wangechi Mutu), political (Sam Durant, Martha Rosler), and so on.

The new New Museum, designed by Tokyo-based architects Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa/SANAA with Gensler, New York, has its own curious parallel with Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum. Notably, both structures are boxy monoliths whose cold shells are broken by dramatic setbacks. The connecting thread between the two buildings is New Museum director Lisa Phillips, a curator at the Whitney for many years before she took her current post.

In any case, "Unmonumental" is certainly edgier and more anti-social than the 2008 Whitney Biennial, but then the biennial went the "punk art" route back in 2006.



John F. Simon Jr.
Flip
2007
Gering & López Gallery



Ruben Ochoa's *An Ideal Disjuncture* (2008) and two monochrome paintings by Olivier Mosset



Mitzi Pederson
Ten Years Later (Or Maybe Just One)
2005
2008 Whitney Biennial