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ART REVIEW | WHITNEY BIENNIAL

At a Biennial on a Budget, Tweaking and Provoking

By HOLLAND COTTER

Whitney Biennial artworks include “Baby” by Thomas Houseago

In what felt like a pre-emptive effort at damage control, the Whitney Museum of American Art did everything to underpitch its 2010 Biennial. With 55 artists, we were advised, it would be half the size of the 2006 show. Unlike the 2008 version, which spilled over into the Park Avenue Armory, this one would be confined to the museum’s premises. No frills. Tight belts. We’re doing our best. Don’t shoot.

The show lives up — or down — to its billing.

It has no theme; its catalog is slight; its installation, spartan.

Spectacle is out. Much of what's in is quiet and hermetic to the point of initially looking blank. The prevailing aesthetic is the art of the tweak, minute variations on conventional forms and historical styles: abstract paintings stitched like quilts, performance pieces channeling the 1960s, and so on.

But if the museum gets full points for truth in advertising, it can also claim credit for a solid and considered product. The show has dead spots, mainly where it reflects the retrenched art-about-art spirit of the day. But it also has strong work (particularly in video) that speaks of life beyond the art factory.

The organizers — Francesco Bonami, an independent curator, and Gary Carrion-Murayari, a young assistant curator at the Whitney — have been careful to balance the roster generationally, with a concentration of midcareer artists. And they've been scrupulous about giving more or less equal time to the dominant trends of the last two years: abstract painting, performance, and political-art-that-isn't-beauty-averse.

Two mural-size photographs by James Casebere, who was born in 1953, hang just off the second-floor elevator. Both are shots of elaborate tabletop models, constructed by the artist, of suburban-style neighborhoods in upstate New York. They have the trippy glow of Claritin ads, and they establish a homey context for the art that follows: Maureen Gallace's Hopperesque paintings of sun-drenched houses; Robert Grosvenor's sculptural version of garden décor; Jessica Jackson Hutchins's living-room sofa piled with ceramics.

Small gouaches by the cartoon artist Robert Williams — "Astrophysically Modified Real Estate" is the title of one — introduce a surrealist spin to the second-floor ensemble. And with a group of snapshot-style family photographs by Nina Berman, domesticity goes dark.

The pictures, collectively called “Marine Wedding,” are part of a series Ms. Berman made of American soldiers who returned home wounded from Iraq. The subject in this case is a young Marine, Ty Ziegel, who lost an arm in a suicide bombing and was so badly burned that his head became a mass of scar tissue. Despite the disfigurement, he married his childhood sweetheart — this is the wedding Ms. Berman records — though the couple separated soon afterward.

You have to get up close to the pictures to see what’s going on. And the shock they generate, in part because of the exploitive vibe they give off, ripples through everything around them. Suddenly you notice that the ceramics on Ms. Hutchins’s sofa resemble severed limbs; that the masklike faces in a nearby sculpture by Huma Bhabha look eaten away; that the musclebound minotaur in a fantastically delicate drawing by Aurel Schmidt is a bionic monstrosity, possible sire to Thomas Houseago’s sasquatchlike “Baby” elsewhere in the show.

Another, equally jarring set of photographs — by the young photojournalist Stephanie Sinclair, of women in Afghanistan who immolated themselves to escape punishing marriages — is installed on, and I’m tempted to say embedded in, the museum’s fourth floor, which is otherwise devoted largely to painting. Like much painting at present (and if you don’t believe there’s a ton of it around, just spend an afternoon in Chelsea), the examples here are clean, cool, classy, retro-modernist, labor-intensive.

Tauba Auerbach’s large paintings, creased and spray-painted, look like abstract versions of Photorealism. Pictures by Sarah Crowner are basically Op Art folded and stitched. To create one of his lacey abstractions, Scott Short elaborates on a production process Franz Kline used 60 years ago. Mr. Short prints photocopies of photocopies of a single blank sheet of colored construction paper, makes slide images of patterns accidentally produced, projects each slide onto a canvas, then painstakingly traces the enlarged pattern.

In this tweak-intensive process, abstraction’s old content — utopian ideals,

personal expression — is squeezed out.

What's left? Décor? Expensive busywork? The catalog refers to such painting as "personal" modernism, though the opposite seems to be true. It's plain old product, and proud.

This isn't to say it can't yield stimulating results. In a series of mostly abstract pictures, R. H. Quaytman combines oil painting, silkscreen, photography and sculptural relief along with references to Edward Hopper, Andy Warhol, Jules Olitski and the Whitney's architecture. Some of her surfaces look as if they could be cleaned with Windex; others are as thick as puff pastries and sprinkled with diamond dust. You think, "What's going on here?" And that's a question art should raise.

At a certain point the curators seem to pose it, critically, about new art in general. In a fourth-floor gallery next to the one filled with abstract paintings they've placed a photographic piece by the conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady. Titled "The First and Last of the Modernists," it pairs portraits of Charles Baudelaire (he looks like Charles Manson in one) and Michael Jackson, raising issues of race, class and the highly ambivalent nature of beauty that the new abstraction ignores.

Ms. O'Grady's work, with roots in the black art and feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s, was overlooked until fairly recently, probably because it's hard to pin down as far as meaning and attitude. And it makes sense that she shares space in the show with some category-dodging younger contemporaries, the five artists who make up the collective called the Bruce High Quality Foundation.

For their Biennial contribution, called "We Love America, and America Loves Us" (the title is adapted from Joseph Beuys), they've created a hybrid ambulance-hearse and projected a film onto its front window: a montage of clips, going back decades, pulled from Hollywood films, television sitcoms, YouTube pratfalls and newsreel disasters. As the images flash by, a woman's voice, speaking in

Whitmanesque cadences, addresses America as if it's an errant lover, a lost parent, a strayed friend.

I found the piece gripping. What I figured would be a shrewd send-up turned out to be a trip through a history I've lived. And the reference to Beuys, and his view of art as an instrument for moral education, seemed apt. Exactly what the Bruce High Quality artists had in mind I don't know, but maybe it doesn't matter. In any case, they're already on to something else. They've organized a biennial of their own, the Brucennial, in SoHo. It opens on Friday. (Review on Page 29.)

In the end it was video along with photography (there's a wonderful, half-hidden Babette Mangolte installation) that made the show tick for me, particularly standout contributions by Sharon Hayes and Kerry Tribe.

Ms. Tribe's film is a dramatization of the real-life story of a man who, after experimental surgery to cure epilepsy in the 1950s, lost the ability to remember any new information beyond a 20-second span. Using actors and a voice-over by the doctor who treated the man, Ms. Tribe not only simulates the rhythms of his baffled perceptions but also gives a sense of all the memories he lost. Extraordinary.

Ms. Hayes's multiscreen "Parole" is more discursive, shifting among several characters, gay and straight, vocal and silent. At its center, though always in the background, is the artist herself, standing outdoors in various cities — London, Frankfurt, Istanbul — reading aloud a letter to an imaginary lover. As the film proceeds, other people read versions of the letter in different languages. They are all, Ms. Hayes proposes, participants in a new form of social protest based on public declarations of love.

Most of the performance-based art in the show is on film, and some of it is really good. In a sort of stand-up comedy video the artist Marianne Vitale spits out abusive commands like a psychotic drill sergeant. In Jesse Aron Green's "Arztliche Zimmergymnastik," 16 men perform exercises prescribed by a 19th-

century German doctor to reinforce obedience to authority and curb sexual excess. As directed by Mr. Green, the moves are executed with snappy precision, but out of sync.

In addition live performances by Theaster Gates, Martin Kersels, Rashaad Newsome and Aki Sasamoto are scheduled for the months ahead. And there's one example of Conceptual Art still to come. It's by Michael Asher, and it consists of keeping the Whitney open around the clock just before the Biennial ends in late May. Mr. Asher was originally told his piece would last a week, but the museum, for budgetary reasons, has cut it back to three days, a regrettable breach of promise in a Biennial that is otherwise exactly what it said it would be.

The 2010 Whitney Biennial remains on view through May 30 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212) 570-3600, whitney.org.