Christian Viveros, "Welcome to the Mixed-Up, Dialed-Down 2010 Whitney Biennial"
The Village Voice, March 2, 2010

Welcome to the Mixed-Up, Dialed-Down 2010 Whitney Biennial

Art from the actual world: Nina Berman's Ty With Gun, 2008 COURTESY NINA BERMAN

The Whitney Biennial could not have come at a worse time. Rarely has the nation—never mind the art world—lolled around in such a watery limbo. Stir in the present moronic obsession with schizo escapism, and the country's addled culture takes on all the clarity of pea soup. If America's collective brainpain is awash in Glenn Beck tea parties, flicks about killer cheerleaders, and "specials" of *Jersey Shore*, what can one possibly expect from its newly impoverished, politically disconnected, and aesthetically rudderless artists?

Curated by veteran Francesco Bonami and absolute beginner Gary Carrion-Murayari, the exhibition—laconically titled "2010," in the event anyone

gets too excited—defines itself as a show that "embodies a cross-section of contemporary art production rather than a specific theme." To the curators' credit, this biennial—for once—makes astoundingly modest claims. The fact that it barely surpasses them is an issue that the public may take up with the artists as opposed to the curators.

Despite its shortcomings, "2010" is an exhibition that deserves some sympathy. In place of gross-out bling, coy relativism, and fake specialist jargon, it offers a tidy sampling—with only 55 artists, it's the second smallest Whitney Biennial ever—of mostly sober artistic propositions, newfangled experiments with forgotten stuff, and a re-engagement with the sort of optimistic humanism that Art, like Liberalism, relegates to the dustbin of history in flusher times.

Not a biennial haunted by the materialistic ghost of Andy Warhol or the silence of Marcel Duchamp—which, as Joseph Beuys rightly said, is overrated—this show leans instead on the achievements of artist-activist Beuys and minor modernists like Beatrice Wood. That it does so at times with a tentativeness that borders on the precious is one of its most teeth-grinding features.

A description of the exhibition's largest mini-trend, this virally fey touch with painterly and sculptural abstraction is a current vogue that the curators oxymoronically identify as "self-modernism." Bonami recently pegged this mania as "a more intimate form of modernity," conveniently ignoring the universalist grail that fired modernists from Manet to Rodchenko.

The shaky ethos of the biennial's new modernism is visible in—among other retread manifestations—the wan photograms of Josh Brand, the Rothko-quoting paintings of Suzan Frecon, the rough-hewn hominids of sculptors Huma Bhabha and Thomas Houseago, and the labored abstractions of Sarah Crowner, Scott Short, Tauba Auerbach, and R.H. Quaytman. In the words of British critic Martin Herbert, the tropes that give birth to these works require being a believer and an agnostic simultaneously. To that I would add the following spur: Where the results yield eye candy (Auerbach, Quaytman), the art still amounts to systems tinkering; where it doesn't, the mark making hardly seems worth the trouble.

A second group of artists called up to consider the "huge atmospheric shift" that has befallen America predictably turn out to be the same postminimal gang whose "institutional critiques" and "dematerialized objects" helped hamstring contemporary art in the first place. There are, for example, Post-Studio gurus Michael Asher and Martin Kersels from CalArts (the first contributes the trite idea that the museum should be open 24/7 for a week; the second, a ratty, mutable soundstage—both about as cool as a backstage pass to Vampire Weekend). Others include Babette Mangolte's record keeping of 1970s dance performances; Sharon Hayes's video installation as a dissertation on Ferdinand de Saussure; Jesse Aron Green's 80-minute loop of psychoanalysis-as-dance; and the work of Reagan-era multiculturalist Lorraine O'Grady, which consists of a wall of diptychs pairing photos of Michael Jackson and Baudelaire absurdly titled *The First and the Last of the Modernists*. Now there's a lady who *loves* her a Facebook page.

Yawn. Why do folks not see the irony of teaching institutional critique within the confines of art schools or the Whitney's own Independent Studio Program? This is art as Tylenol PM, including the wake-up migraine.

The biennial gets onto much better footing with the selection of artists who, in the context of recent American visual culture, might be called the new realists. A heterogeneous bunch that includes painters (Maureen Gallace, Lesley Vance, Dawn Clements), photo-journalists (Nina Berman, Stephanie Sinclair), video makers (Alex Hubbard, Rashaad Newsome), and installationists (Hannah Greely, David Adamo), what these folks chiefly have in common is an engagement with some urgent or exaggerated aspect of the real world—as opposed to, say, the air castles conjured up by the maharishis of academic postmodernism.

Chuck in Pae White's gorgeous 10-foot tapestry of spiraling smoke, James Casebere's sly photographic re-creations of ticky-tacky homes in Dutchess County, Curtis Mann's affecting bleached-out print mural of Beirut, and Kate Gilmore's poignantly hilarious videos of herself performing stupid Sisyphean tricks, and you have a biennial that begins to address itself, with newfound relevance, to what the exhibition catalog terms the nation's "larger social and cultural transformation."

Two bona fide biennial standouts lead the new realist charge: There's Chicago-based activist, urban planner, and sculptor Theaster Gates, whose Buddhist shoeshine environment contributes real nervousness and some bliss to the uptight *uptownness* of being at the Whitney. And then there's the Bruce High Quality Foundation. The piece everyone will be talking about for years, their funeral for American art features rat-tat-tat moving images projected onto the windshield of a Cadillac hearse (Beuys arriving

at JFK, fat Elvis, Obama, *Ghostbusters*, etc.) synched to a female voice reading a "Dear John" letter to America.

"We're over America, and America is over us," it intones mournfully. The Bruce's narrative tableau proceeds from there to disgorge a visual-aural elegy for American culture. What it offers—along with the work of select other artists in the exhibition—is nothing less than an alternative model for art making today: an approach that is creatively unfettered and responsive to the world beyond its navel, the movement of markets and art's often specious rules. The resemblance to real modernism is uncanny.

Consider this when judging the exhibition: Change most often comes in the manner of a faucet drip, not a sledgehammer. The new realists at the 2010 Whitney Biennial may not yet be tearing down the Berlin Wall of postmodern influence in contemporary art, but it is a sound bitchslap of a beginning.