

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Linda Yablonsky, "Women's Work" *The New York Times Style Magazine*, February 22, 2010



Women's Work

Hardly a Tweet had been sent after the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) released the names of the 55 artists selected for its 75th biennial before it was already known as "the women's biennial." "That's crazy," says Francesco Bonami, the chief curator of the exhibition, now on view through the end of May. "To be the women's biennial, 55 of the artists would have to be female."

Nonetheless, more than half the artists represented are women, a record for the Whitney's marquee exhibition. Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari, his associate curator, say the number was happenstance. They intend their survey, titled simply "2010," only to reflect the tenor of American art right now, which they see as "somber and intimate." Not feminine.

If anything, "2010" suggests that the art of the moment has achieved gender equality, even if the market for it has not. But inequality is not the issue here. Whereas the wisecracking feminist protest group the Guerrilla Girls once listed "working without the pressures of success" and "having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood" among the perks for women artists, most of those in the biennial seem blasé about their place in the social order and entitled to the occasional appearance in a fashion spread, where the glamour quotient is highest.

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That would have been anathema in the 1970s and '80s, when a gale force of feminism roared through every corridor of our culture and women made their own bodies a medium for art. In fact, many women selected for "2010" are simply making art and don't believe their status as women has anything to do with how far they get with it — or not.

They seem preoccupied with the basics: material, color and form. (An animated exchange between some of those present for the photograph seen here moved smoothly from studio practice to lipstick.) Few would make a work today like the one Barbara Kruger did in 1989, when she stated flat out, "Your body is a battleground."

Take Aurel Schmidt's seven-foot-tall drawing of a minotaur, rendered in images of banana peels, cigarettes, bottle caps and a condom. "His body is a whole universe," says Schmidt, a 27-year-old Canadian-born New Yorker. "It's really an insane portrait of a man, but it's interesting to explore what is masculine and make it look sexual and positive." She adds, "I don't want anyone to accuse me of being a man hater, which I'm not. This is also about the masculine side of me."

Lorraine O'Grady, at 75 the senior presence in the biennial, also takes a poignant look at gender slippage but ups the ante by blurring the races, too. In a series of diptychs called "The First and the Last of the Modernists," she paired found photographs of Charles Baudelaire and Michael Jackson as members of one miscegenated family. "I'm serious about making the comparison," she says. "They are the same person." Except that O'Grady has substituted the increasingly effeminate Jackson for Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's black common-law wife, the woman whose

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experience of his world she believes also deepened his understanding of art. But it is the progressive physical deterioration of the two men that is most striking. “The aspiration to greatness was the same with each,” O’Grady says. “And it came back to bite both of them.”

Photographs by women in this biennial suggest anything but a weaker sex. The Memphis-based Tam Tran, just 23 and making only her second appearance in an exhibition outside of college, has contributed portraits of her 4-year-old nephew in a superhero costume that Bonami found disturbing. “I was interested more in photojournalism than constructed, high-production pictures,” he says, describing Nina Berman’s series on a veteran of the Iraq war as “brutal.” And a photo essay by Stephanie Sinclair may threaten to steal the show. Sinclair, 37, has had to be tough. She covered the American invasion of Iraq and lived in Baghdad before moving to Beirut. Between 2003 and 2005 she documented the fate of young Afghan women who had burned themselves, often beyond recognition, sometimes to death. More than half were married between the ages of 9 and 13, uneducated and emotionally undeveloped. The reason one gave for her attempted suicide was that she broke her husband’s television.

Sinclair’s photos may be gruesome, but they’re filled with more compassion than sisterhood. Still, her sex helped. “Because we’re foreign,” Sinclair says of her female colleagues, “Afghan men are more hesitant to get near us. Male photographers would ever get the same access.”

This biennial generally puts the personal before the political. Sharon Hayes, 39, is mainly concerned with speech and who gets to voice or hear it. The mute character in her four-channel video installation, “Parole,” came out of recent performances using texts like Anna Rüling’s turn-of-

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the-century treatise, “What Interest Does the Women’s Movement Have in Solving the Homosexual Problem?” Indeed, Hayes says everyone in her video occupies “a queer position.” Or as she puts it, “There’s a fine line between a butch lesbian and a trans man.”

Optical trickery plays a part in Tauba Auerbach’s “Fold” paintings, which occupy what she calls “a liminal state between two or three dimensions.” So what if the artist is a vintage clotheshorse? She’s a reader of science and art magazines, and her latest fascination is for hyperbolic surfaces and fractal patterns. “My measure of success has much more to do with communicating the ideas in my work,” says Auerbach, 28, “than with the quantifiable achievement of being in a particular show.”

Perhaps she doth protest too much. Josephine Meckseper’s resplendent film, shot last year at the giant Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn., is a “consumer critique on the collapse and failure of capitalism,” and incorporates military recruiting footage on display there. “It’s a very extreme juxtaposition of shopping and recruiting,” Meckseper says, adding that the best time she has for shopping is usually between flights. “The Munich airport is amazing,” she says. “They’re even selling cars.”

One thing the biennial isn’t selling is sex. There is little in the way of explicit material, but that doesn’t mean the show isn’t sexy. At times it is funny, and often it is beautiful.

Pae White’s nearly-40-foot-long digitally woven tapestry of a wisp of smoke is rather amazing. Maureen Gallace’s modest still lifes of summer homes on Cape Cod, Mass., are dreamy. R. H. Quaytman’s photo-based paintings nest together in shimmering rectangles. Jessica Jackson

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Hutchins sends up domesticity with her loopy ceramics of common household goods sitting on furniture plastered with newspapers. Lesley Vance paints luscious abstractions that begin as still lifes. Aki Sasamoto's installation and dance performance involves improvisations with Japanese oranges and furniture.

But not all the art is nice. Marianne Vitale's video "Patron" subjects an art-collecting audience to a series of humiliating tasks like "Imagine your feet soaking in gopher urine."

This is a biennial eager for emotional engagement. Isn't that a feminine trait? Ask the two guys in charge.