

Levin, Todd. "Whitney Biennial: The Voices of Silence." *Flash Art* (May/June 2010): 61-62.

Flash Art

NEWS



NEW YORK

WHITNEY BIENNIAL

THE VOICES OF SILENCE

AN ART ADVISOR'S OPINION

Todd Levin

Whitney Biennials (and -ennials of any type) are overrated vehicles if curatorially approached as a singularity attempting an overview of the state and direction of American art. The current state of American art is more akin to a foggy swamp, crisscrossed by numerous muddy paths that disappear into the mist, most leading nowhere. Nevertheless, collectors troll these paths at biennials, attempting to ferret out who will be anointed the 'hot shot' artist(s) in the exhibition, and then cornering gallerists at the vernissage to secure the glittering trophies. There is a lot that is ham-fisted, obvious and dreary about ranking artists, but it is an endemic aspect of these proceedings.

As to this exhibition specifically, it is a mildly interesting show. It posits modestly viable continuities in American art. As always, there are strange inclusions and

exclusions. The exhibition is reasonably comfortable to navigate. It is marked by diversity and breadth of form. Most of the artworks are negligible. Perhaps the most cogent statement in the catalogue's deficient essay is its summation that "for many, it [art] is also an effort to make sense of their own existence..." Malraux stated this more succinctly in *The Voices of Silence*: "All art is revolt against man's fate..."

Suzan Frecon, at almost 70, is still a hotshot. Her paintings have a blunt bare quality to their shapes. The balanced masses and offset arrangement are classic forms of composition. The paint

is applied with intense finesse. The result is both complex and simple, and the work is as orthodox as it is radical. These paintings show the extent of what can be done in painting, and have an immediacy and veracity much needed now. Paintings of this size are \$160,000.

The installation of R.H. Quayman corroborates that she is one of the most intriguing artists in their forties. The approaches used — of fantastic clarity both in format and color — achieve a maximum of boldness and impact, and reveal a spectacular compositional ability. Her references to both the building architecture and Edward Hopper

strikes more sparks than I can kindle in a paltry paragraph. The vigor and intricacy of this installation are insanely great. Prices are \$5,000-\$18,000.

Ms. Frecon and Ms. Quayman have some distant things in common with Tauba Auerbach. In Ms. Auerbach's case, none of the relationships between the visual/perceptual sense or flatness/three dimensionality fail entirely, but they suggest more profound and compelling conclusions than are presented. These large and fashionable paintings are momentarily pleasant and subsequently bland. The involutioned surfaces suggest crumpled cloth — not a depiction of cloth, but a diagram of it. This is a very lax idea of painting, and confirms

JESSICA JACKSON HUTCHINS, *Couch For a Long Time*, 2009. Couch, newspaper, ceramic, 193 x 74 x 90 cm. Collection of the artist; courtesy Small A Projects, New York and Derek Eller, New York. Photo: Dan Kvitka.

NEWS

the opinion that Ms. Auerbach's reputation may be exaggerated. Paintings are \$40,000-\$70,000.

In a serene way, the paintings of Maureen Gallace are dynamic, but their organization is decidedly subtle. The muted color, the shapes, and even the degree of care are rather like aspects in Morandi's work, but Ms. Gallace's own individuality remains exultant. The painting's nuance is amplified by the inclusion of qualities resistant to expression. This coolness of expression is one of Ms. Gallace's most beguiling qualities. Paintings are \$47,000.

Lesley Vance is perfectly represented by four small paintings. An obvious comparison to her work is the structure of 17th-century Spanish painting; there is a diagrammatic and emotional affinity, but certainly not one of philosophy. Confident technique



and lambent atmosphere are the work's salient virtues. They are intuitive, refined, and canted by motion. The compositional parts are not rigid delineations of their space, but appear capable of expansion and contraction. Paintings are \$7,000-\$9,000.

The delicate drawing technique of Roland Flexner is derived from the Japanese *Suminagashi* art of floating ink on water or gelatin. Mr. Flexner uses the technique with extreme finesse. These drawings' reserve and compressed intimacy sharpen the delicacy of the technique. Mr. Flexner's works are diminutive spatially, but they're compelling visually. Single drawings are \$6,000.

Charles Ray's opulent room of flowers is capable, certainly communicative in a general way, certainly easy, but not at

all engrossing. One must ask if all fifteen works chosen and the amount of space dedicated to them were necessary. Four works would have said as much. Works on paper are \$100,000-\$200,000, which seems egregiously excessive.

Jessica Jackson Hutchins presents a single work existing somewhere between ordinary sculpture and something new without sculpture's structure and qualities. It is not a synthesis and thoroughly independent. There is little of what is tritely referred to as composition and it cannot be understood through a contemplation of the sculpture's individual elements. This attitude is recent and conspicuously lively and strong. The work is improbable as well as exceptional, and should present a general threat to much current dullness in sculpture. Sculptures are

\$12,000-\$30,000.

In contrast to Ms. Hutchins' work, the sculpture of Thomas Houseago is massive and peculiar. Retaining the appearances of a passive classical gesture, Mr. Houseago nonetheless manages to turn sculpture into academic art. This sort of hyper expres-



sionistic composition is a chronic fault of much younger art. The work is vigorous and insubstantial, but good enough to make it conceivable that although Mr. Houseago might do something compelling and coherent one day, he hasn't done it to date. Sculptures are rather expensive, \$200,000-\$300,000.

The work of The Bruce High Quality Foundation is abecedarian in both conception and creation. Their vocabulary exceeds their knowledge of its meaning. They can't seem to decide if art or morals have been corrupted, and their allusion to the work of Beuys is tenuous and sophomoric. I suppose the work is meant to have verve and wit. It's vacuous. Prices are unquoted.

The photographs of Nina Berman and Stephanie Sinclair are familiar stylistically and well done. For both artists, the works imagery and psychology are too obvious and simplistic to command attention beyond the initial shock of empathy. How interesting would these photographs be if the subject matter were not so brutal? One thinks of Arbus's ability to frame everyday people as emotionally moving and psy-

chologically powerful without the need to resort to spectacular tragedy. Photographs by Ms. Berman are between \$1,500-\$3,000, and those by Ms. Sinclair were not priced at the time of this review.

Josephine Meckseper's video is definite in structure and movement. This video is both objective as a documentary, and yet the subject matter is ructiously subjective. It is simply and broadly scaled and consequently it has a peculiar potency. Videos are \$34,000.

In comparison to Ms. Meckseper, Kate Gilmore's video is fresh and vivacious, but not inquisitive. It is true that an ordinary action can have an indirectly mirific effect, and that a series of ordinary acts can raise heck. In this case, Lucy Gunning's 1993 video *Climbing Around My Room* presented the same subject matter in a more sophisticated and engrossing way. Videos are \$10,000-\$13,000.

"2010" is a good facsimile of a good Whitney Biennial. Overall, the work is assured, diverse within limits, new in a way, and each piece has all the aspects of what we consider to be art. In the end there is a great deal of unexceptional work. Whether this is a reflection of curatorial timidity, or a general state of timidity in American art at the present moment, is debatable.

From top: JESSE ARON GREEN, still from *Ärztliche Zimmergymnastik*, 2008. Hi-Definition video projection, color, sound, 80 mins. loop. Collection of the artist. STEPHANIE SINCLAIR, *Self-Immolation in Afghanistan: A Cry for Help*, 2005. Digital print, dimensions variable. Collection of the artist. Courtesy VII, New York. PAE WHITE, *Still*, Untitled, 2010. Installation view at the Whitney Biennial, New York, 2010. Photo: Sheldon C. Collins.