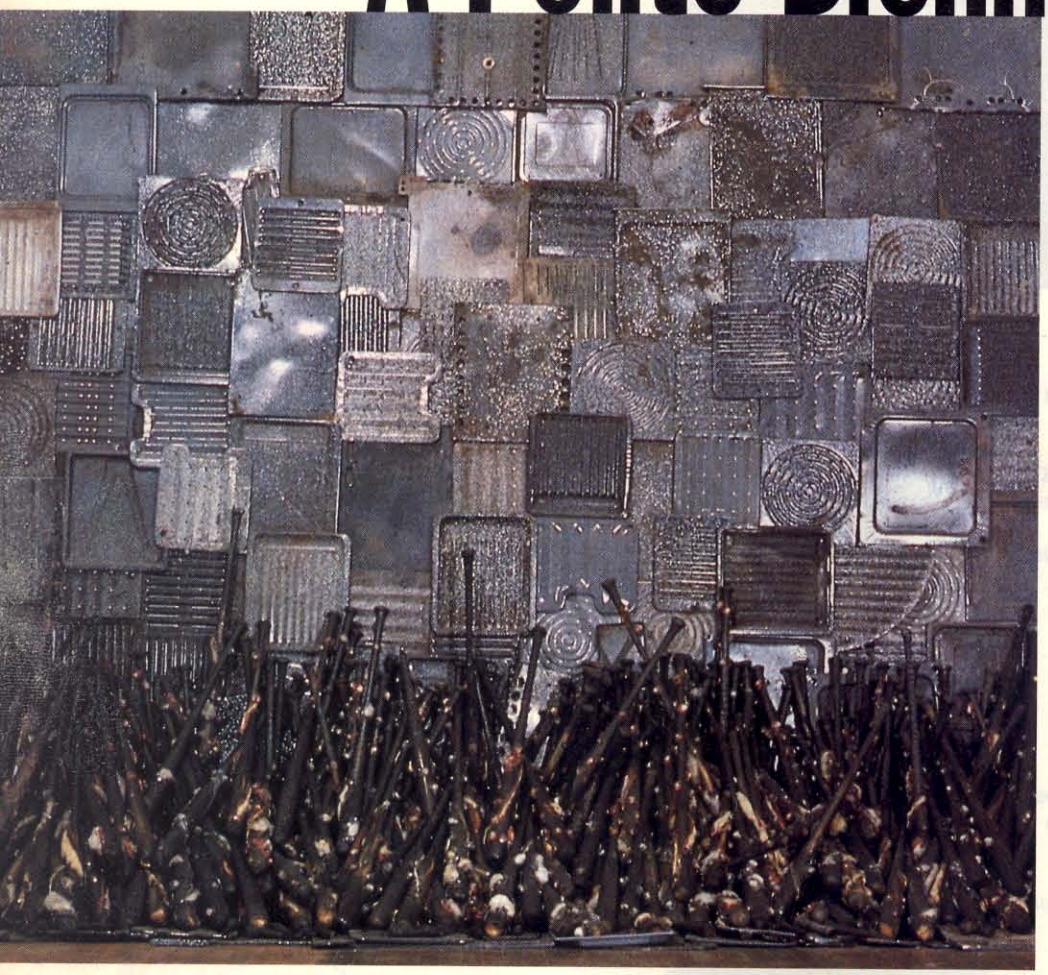
ART MARK STEVENS

A Polite Biennial



The Biennial is New York's version of a nineteenth-century Paris Salon—it generates more contempt than respect. But that's why we like it.

Above: Nari Ward's *Iron Heavens.* Below: *Woman,* by Milton Resnick.

"ALL IS TURBULENCE, A HURLY-BURLY OF STYLES and colors, a cacophony of tones, enormous trivialities, platitudes of gesture and pose, nobility 'by numbers,' clichés of all kinds . . . in short, there is a complete absence of unity, whose only result is a terrible weariness for the mind and the eyes." Such was Charles Baudelaire's review of the Paris Salon of 1846. It would serve just as well, of course, for Biennials at the Whitney Museum.

The **Biennial** is our version of the Salon, a wearying hurly-burly that generates more contempt than respect. That, of course, is also its charm. For both critics and the art public, it is deeply satisfying to have a big sloppy target every two years. It provides a chance to indulge both the high prophetic voice—to sing, for example, of the decline and fall of art—and the low gossipy whisper. "Can you believe they're showing Sally Schnabel?"

"You didn't know? A friend of the curator."

Yet the Biennial, much like the Salon in its day, is also helpful as topical journalism. It showcases what's fashionable. While the art itself is inevitably uneven—and when good or unfamilar, not shown in telling depth—the attitudes of the curators and artists often present a revealing comment on the times. The Biennial of 1993, widely denounced as noisy agitprop, nonetheless highlighted a widespread didactic strain in contemporary art. Its weaknesses revealed, better than any critic could, the exhaustion of the form.

The current Biennial presents the usual Baudelairean hurly-burly—but with a sly difference. Organized by Klaus Kertess, the adjunct curator for drawings at the Whitney (with John G. Hanhardt organizing the film-and-video section), the show includes 89 artists, with work ranging from the elegant calligraphy-inspired paintings of Brice Marden to the nipple rings of Catherine Opie. Despite the latter, what's palpable this time around is a determination not to offend. In this wary survey, "good taste" is often a beard for timidity.

The politics of this show come not from political art but from a refining away of the rough, and through a carefully calibrated nod to various art-world constituencies and expectations. There are too many already-famous artists represented with indifferent work. The assorted currents of contemporary art are invariably presented in their most polite and handsome forms. The best example is that of the painter-provocateur Sue Williams. At the last Biennial, Williams showed a sculpture of an abused woman lying on the floor; nearby was a puddle of *faux* vomit. Now this scabrous artist is presenting paintings whose scatty daubings are almost winsome.

This is the politics of politesse. It comes to the forefront now because, in part, we are living in a conservative period. Perhaps the Whitney, concerned about its reputation for being both trendy and left-wing, is displaying its cozier, corporate side. And, of course, no commanding style or attitude now rules the art world. So the postmodernist impulse, older and more tired, is perhaps turning softer and prettier. In a period of exhaustion, why not sit back and enjoy a carefully composed, undisturbing panorama?

The theme of the show is "metaphor," which is less a theme than a suitcase, and the unremarkable emphasis is upon ambiguity, narrative, and formal values. "What is

being proposed here is not a return to formalism but an art in which meaning is embedded in formal value," Kertess writes in the catalogue. "An acknowledgment of sensuousness is indispensable—whether as play or sheer joy or the kind of subversity that has us reaching for a rose and grabbing a thorn. Art is a platform for experience, not a lesson." The catalogue includes almost no analysis of the art selected. Kertess has instead written a brief introduction and published a poem by John Ashbery, fiction by Lynne Tillman, and an essay by the scientist Gerald Edelman called "The Wordless Metaphor: Visual Art and the Brain."

Kertess has nothing much to say, in short, but hopes to say it well. This approach, despite obvious weaknesses, also has some virtues. It is better than saying too much badly; and, indeed, any art in which meaning is not "embedded in formal value" is just a billboard in the dark. Owing to its low-key character, moreover, Kertess's Biennial brings out some surprising qualities in contemporary art. For example, any portrayal of sexual subcultures—now a fashionable genre—is expected to be sharp, hostile, and aggressive. With a couple of exceptions, however, the imagery here is not only fairly tame but also poignant.

Nan Goldin's wistful *Tokyo Love* is a wall-size grid of big snapshots of what looks like an S&M party. Several figures recur in the photographs, creating a kind of implied narrative. We see in the center panel a vertical progression of images of a young woman arriving, dressing up, and S&M'ing around. In the bottom image, however, she is no longer wearing her tough-girl makeup and dress-up. She holds—with a look of tender sadness, as if she will never attain her dream of outrageousness—a gorgeously grotesque iguana. In the hazy background, there are some Barbie dolls.

In Goldin's piece, lurid color and melodramatic goings-on serve as a foil for the lonely humanity of the figures. She even risks the sentimental. An image on the bottom right shows cherry blossoms fallen on the street. What saves the fallen-blossom image from bathos is an unexpected visual connection, or rhyme, with the picture just above. The eye suddenly passes from fishnet stockings and leopard spots to scattered petals—a visual haiku.

Kertess's show also runs against expectation in celebrating a satirical vein that nonetheless avoids the merely, or the brutally, bitter. Frank Moore's vision of *Yosemite*, for example, is genuinely comic. He evokes Hudson River School painting while showing the park as a kind of hallucinatory Disney attraction, in which the mountains are money and the campfires send up different smoke signals—peace symbol, Mickey Mouse, dollar signs, *Playboy* bunny, AIDS ribbon. The frame, with inset pinecones, is masterful kitsch.

There is more painting this time, usually drawn from the tastier, funnier, or more decorative work of the moment—such as Lari Pittman's Pop fancies, which play the brassy against the elegant. Even the work that is not painting often has a lush surface. Nari Ward's scorched black bats, totems of the inner city, call up Nevelson and Pollock. And in what will be the hit of the show, Nancy Rubins has transformed a flying pile of mattresses and cake into a baroque dream of Tiepolo.

Kertess extends a courteous hand to some who, while well-known in the art world, have received little museum recognition. Milton Resnick, one of the grand old men from the Abstract Expressionist years, is represented by works in which a ghostly figure emerges from the densely clotted paint. In the tradition of Giacometti and Soutine, Resnick brings such intensity to bear upon his materials that they finally yield something entirely immaterial—a kind of light or shimmer that can only be called spiritual. The way he places the figure in the space shows the hand of the true artist rather than that of the decorator. The landscape painter Jane Freilicher also creates marvelous surfaces, in which meaning is always "embedded in formal value." Like Resnick, she has grown dreamier over the years. In a painting of mysterious melancholy, a figure borrowed from Watteau sings to parrots on a New York City rooftop. No less mysterious is the painter Catherine Murphy's stark juxtaposition of naked winter branches and a decorative curtain, or her image of clipped locks of hair in a sink. It's too bad the work of these two painters is displayed in such a dingy room.

Kertess has also welcomed several little-known artists who fit well with the company. John O'Reilly's erotic musings will remind many of the carefully broken poetry of Joseph Cornell collages. Ellen Gallagher makes an art of strong whispers. She dreams of the sublime perfection of the Agnes Martin grid, yet must also remember, and honor, the anonymous and exaggerated lips of the black minstrel singers and make her grids from impoverished materials. Her surfaces have the poignance of a wall in a sharecropper's shack.

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Top: John O'Reilly's *Of Benjamin Britten (Home).* Above: *Curtained Window,* by Catherine Murphy.

In his complaint a century and a half ago, Baudelaire compared the Salon unfavorably to the "unity" of achievement found in a museum. This is a true but also unfair charge to level at any contemporary survey. Kertess has tried to catch the spirit of today's art by employing a kind of edgy visual charm, which is rather like pursuing a whale (or is it a guppy?) with a butterfly net. But I found his Whitney show stimulating, mainly because a measure of visual charm is now rare. Imagine a contemporary show that honors Watteau and Tiepolo without too much irony! Today's curators usually chase butterflies with a crab net. (Through June 4.) ▬

Photographs courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art.