

# MODERN PAINTERS

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## **PERFORMANCE ANXIETY: *Political currents at the Whitney Biennial***



**By RoseLee Goldberg**

Spike Lee's film about the fall of New Orleans into the waters of the great bayou puts the shocking indifference with which this tragedy was met on cinematic record. That this documentary film with no aspirations for artworld attention, and which anyone could have seen on HBO where it premiered a year ago, was selected for the 2008 Whitney

Biennial came at first as an odd surprise. However, its significance would soon be revealed: placed in the midst of the Biennial's varied assembly of recent artworks, the film speaks volumes about the thesis driving the exhibition (thoughtfully curated by Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momim), while also raising the roof with its quiet despair. On exiting the room in which it is installed, one notices that the tenor of the surrounding work—by 81 artists, most of whom created site-specific installations—is considerably different. For example, the film's impact noticeably alters the meaning of Eduardo Serabia's object-filled "gift shop" next door. Rows of painted urns and identical ceramic busts, each depicting the same figure in prayer-like gesture covering its mouth, are seen not as a satirical gibe at drug smuggling in Mexico—which is how the artist's custom-made commodities are frequently interpreted—but as a more frightening morgue of *momento mori*, the result of societal carelessness, not individual cunning.

Indeed, the curatorial installation seems to be setup for a series of entrances and exits, allowing for a gradual unfolding of ideas. **Walk into Heather Rowe's corridor of two-by-fours, its shards of mirror embedded at angles into narrow strips of wood; retrace your steps through Matt Mullican's labyrinth of black-and-white handwritten texts hung side by side; or pause inside a colorful cul-de-sac of Joe Bradley's diagrammatic figures standing at attention and simultaneously, you'll be registering numerous art-historical signposts along the way: Rowe points to Bruce Nauman and Gordon Matta-Clark; Mullican to Surrealist word games and Fluxus poster writing; and Bradley to Ellsworth Kelly and Kasimir Malevich.** Yet such comparative history hopping only serves as a prelude to the more volatile works that follow. Starting with Charles Long's fragile papier-mache drippings held in the air by copper

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pedestals, Ry Ricklen's box spring flopped on a pedestal places on the floor, and Mitzi Pederson's crumbling cinderblock wall, a deliberate thesis begins to make itself apparent. A creeping anxiety is in the air, and these works are made of "poor" materials intentionally, creating an edgy atmosphere more visceral than conceptual, and giving physical form to a rising conscience about social and political shifts taking place in American right now. William Cordova's built-to-scale house where Black Panthers were killed by Chicago police in a predawn raid in 1969, both inviting and unnerving, further process the point; curatorial sotto voce says that perhaps we should be exploring what is disturbing us: that ongoing war in Iraq, our inadequate political direction, conversations about art focused on market and money, and domestic disasters like Hurricane Katrina.

Julia Meltzer and David Thorne's video installed back-to-back with Lee's film (the viewing spaces share a wall), as though dirty floodwaters had seeped from one cinematic space to the other. Its projection of performer Rami Farah's 32-minute monologue from Damascus, Syria, describes a part of the world very different from New Orleans, but one no less at the mercy of a neglectful and inglorious government. "It's not a matter of if but when," reads the title of this powerful harangue, and then continues: "Expectations were repeatedly raised and lowered and people grew exhausted from never knowing if the moment was at hand or was still to come."

Omer Fast's four-channel video projection raises similar questions. Not revealing whether an event actually occurred, or was the product of a fictive imagination—if it was staged on a film set or filmed in situ—the piece has viewers going round and round like players in a game of musical chairs. But there was neither music nor light relief to be had at the end: Fast's construction of events in the life of a US Army sergeant—a breakneck car ride with a masochistic girlfriend in small-town Germany, an accidental shooting of a man in a car carrying an Iraqi family on a desert road, a subsequent interview, both improvised and rehearsed, between the sergeant and the filmmaker—could be spliced together into a narrative whole only by pacing around the screens, watching one side and then the other. Few works in the Biennial synthesize up-to-the-minute affairs as directly as Fast's video, but even so, the power of suggestion of the overarching subject matter of the exhibition—to register, no matter how faintly, the political temperature of our times—allows even a sensual and visually delicious triptych by John Baldessari to be decoded as political doublespeak.

In the "Arms & legs, Etc." and "Noses & Ears, Etc." series (both 2007) Baldessari melds painting, photography, and sculpture and depicts our eyes, ears, and noses carefully listening in on wiretaps and sniffing out secrets. Iconographic clues, like an all-American plaid jacket and a woman's bejeweled arm, ironically critique the games people play, as precisely and humorously as any in Baldessari's oeuvre. Throughout his career this satirist from Santa Monica has pointed out the real meaning of media, revealing how its insidious messages enter the brain through our senses. Sherrie Levine, a direct descendant of Baldessari in her ability to make old images new, here provides a row of breastplates exhibited like trophies from a long-ago safari. Levine's "body masks" of a pregnant woman's torso, similar to those worn in fertility rites by male initiates of the Makonde tribe in Tanzania, juxtapose the luxury of Western collecting and its pride of display with the imperative of African ritual. Her works—

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meshing colonial nostalgia and global economics—are quite different from Baldessari's, but both artists use the corporeal image to make politically driven points.

A running commentary on societal issues can be followed through each floor of the Whitney; but from time to time, touchstones for concentrated visual contemplation are provided as well—although perhaps too tentatively for the full pleasure that could be had if they were more deliberately displayed. Mary Heilmann's three small abstractions, one with a diagonal sash of paint as though smacked with a stick, have an expressionist urgency unusual in her work, yet fulfill a craving, as she has said, "for something still and quiet on the wall." Carol Bove's delicate sculpture, an upended reflecting pond of shimmering bronze rods called *Night Sky over New York*, seems to point to the sky about Walter De Maria's kilometer of bronze rods laid out on the floor of a building in SoHo. And James Welling's blue-tinted photographs of twisted torsos made of wire mesh suggest an earlier pioneer of photography-drawn-with-light, Man Ray. Poetic and elegant, they contribute an understated mood to the Biennial that might also be described as sedate, as though Yvonne Rainer's famous '60s-era manifesto "no to the spectacle," was taken as a rule. "Lessness," to use a word from Beckett (as Huldich does in her catalogue essay), is apparent in scale as well as in the overriding aesthetic, for example in Karen Kilimnik's sparse distillation of history painting, with its four diminutive paintings and a chandelier. As I moved past a group of schoolchildren sitting cross-legged on the floor, a knowing sixth grader able answered "Less is more" when her teacher asked why Kilimnik chose to make so little of her allocated exhibition space.

Despite the curator's penchant for subtlety in the realms of painting and sculpture, however, most of the film and video works on view are—like Lee's documentary and Fast's video installation—direct and engaging experiences. Javier Téllez's remarkable film featured six blind people entering an expansive and empty swimming pool in single file. With white sticks pointing at the ground ahead of them, they approach an Indian elephant one by one. As each person moves around the creature, hand outstretched, they describe what they feel for the camera. With cinematic surface as sensitively rendered and composed as that of any still photograph, Tellez's intensely emotional film contrasts with the whimsy of Mika Rottenberg's multichannel video, with its bizarre take of ladies adorned in floor-length hair and petticoats while engaged in a cheese-making ritual. Meanwhile, Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's film of a Viking-helmeted protagonist tearing through a denuded Los Angeles sets one kind of strange road trip against another, as Olaf Breuning's wild-eyed European ecotourist races through a marketplace in Papua New Guinea, making ridiculous attempts to connect with the local inhabitants.

Many of these same artists, 33 in all, were given additional space for realizing the frenetic restlessness of their films in performances and installations at the Park Avenue Armory. Its extraordinary castle-like edifice, built in 1881 as a home for an elite militia unit, was given over to the Biennial curators and the Art Production Fund, their partners for this section, by the adventurous Armory director, Rebecca Robertson. Each night, for two and a half weeks, the building's storied rooms, grand staircase, and vast drill hall were crowded with Biennial fans attending its free events. The excitement of peering into gilt-framed mirrors, ornately carved panels doubling as covers for hidden passages, and glass cases bursting with coats of arms, took everyone by surprise, not least the invited artists, who had to work hard to

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make an impact on the mise-en-scène. Those performances that fit the décor best involved sound, such as Marina Rosenfeld's *Teenage Lontano*, with its 40 children standing in a line down the center of the magnificent hall singing Gyorgy Ligeti's *Lontano*. Other pieces appeared to absorb the musty history of the rooms and the chattering ghosts of military units past. DJ olive's army tent with cots where passerby were invited to take a nap, was installed in an upper room ringed in stuffed moose heads, while Coco Fusco's uncomfortably realistic lecture on war and torture, with the artist dressed in US Army uniform, connected the cruelty and inanity of the Iraq war to the activity of soldiering a century ago. Huddled in small rooms, dancing together in expansive ones and talking volubly in the corridors in between, visitors to the Armory were overtaken by a palpable sense of community during the Biennial program. It was an expression, no doubt, of a longing for connection in these times of shifting political and economic realities. ■■