

ARTFORUM

Biennial 2000

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

by Katy Siegel
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“BIENNIAL 2000”

WHITNEY MUSEUM
OF AMERICAN ART,
NEW YORK

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If it's not one thing, it's another. The reviews are in: This is the “boring” Biennial. Critics ranging from Michael Kimmelman (the New York Times) to Jerry Saltz (the Village Voice) were lulled into a fitful sleep by the Whitney's millennial Biennial. Why were such normally tireless lookers unable to keep their eyes open?

The obvious points are the absence of a theme and a unified curatorial attitude. In addition to their much-remarked geographical distribution, the six curators are individually known for different strengths: formalist sensitivity (Michael Auping); installation art (Hugh Davies); Conceptual work (Jane Farver); politically oriented art (Andrea Miller-Keller); film, video, and public art (Valerie Cassells); identity issues (Lawrence Rinder). To a somewhat lesser extent than “Greater New York”—the “alternative” picture of local contemporary art running concurrently at P.S.1—multiple viewpoints obviate any one perspective at the Whitney.

This Biennial also boasts (courtesy of Auping, who was responsible for the hang) the most elegant installation I can remember ever seeing at the Whitney; airy and spacious, it is the opposite of the “festival” effect everyone complained about at last year's Venice Biennale. So how is this a minus? Some of these works have a little too much room; maybe you'd prefer to see



Opposite page: Sarah Sze, *Untitled*, 2000, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view. Photo: George Hirose.
This page, above: “Biennial 2000,” installation view. Left to right, works by: Salomón Huerta, Kim Dingle, Chris Verene, and Lisa Yuskavage.
Below, left to right: Salomón Huerta, *Untitled Head*, 1999, oil on canvas, 11 1/4 x 12”. Salomón Huerta, *Untitled House*, 1999, oil on canvas, 14 x 14”.

a third more artists and a little squishing. In past Biennials, that squishing at least contributed to a (false) feeling of excitement. Here the artworks are fewer and farther between; consequently, fewer connections spring up between individual works, emphasizing the exhibition's eclecticism.

This eclecticism is most notable in the selection of artists themselves, the contexts and localities from which they emerge. It's always amusing to read journalistic accounts of curators slogging from studio to studio for two years, only to come up with the usual suspects. Here some of the artists actually hail from places other than New

THERE IS NO MORE BAD ART HERE THAN USUAL, AND IT'S A RELIEF THAT THE BAD ART DOESN'T PROJECT A DISTRACTING VENEER OF EXCITEMENT.

York or Los Angeles (although frankly not as many as one might have expected, given the way this feature has been both touted and criticized by the media). Some make explicit reference to “American-ness” as well: the American flags of ERRE, Hans Haacke, and Yukinori Yanagi; Kay Rosen's quote from “The Star-Spangled Banner.” We even have that most American of American art traditions, a do-it-yourselfer, in the figure of folk artist Thornton Dial. But aside from the Texas posse, the presence of US artists from non-art capitals is ultimately less noticeable than the appearance of transplanted New Yorkers such as Cai Guo-Qiang and Shirin Neshat.

At a time when internationalism seems to be the compelling contemporary-art question, the issue pervading American art is often reduced to cosmopolitanism versus provincialism. An artist who addresses this condition—and to some extent transcends

it—is Franco Mondini-Ruiz, who moves between the “provinces” (San Antonio) and New York. His joint *Infinito Botanica* installation and art cart displays Chicano tchotchkes next to work made by other Texas, Mexico City, and New York artists. He brings his context with him, refusing his chance to leap unencumbered into the fabulous white box. Mondini-Ruiz covers not only the split between Mexican and Anglo cultures, between hi and lo, but also the divide between the local and the general.

People in other places are often (though not always) aware to some degree of their provincialism; rarely are New Yorkers similarly self-conscious. But like any locality, New York is not without its own brand of provincialism: grooviness passing for relevance. Our embrace of this criterion probably factors strongly in the critics' “boring” verdict—this, after all, is the uncoolest, least groovy Biennial ever. There's little glamour and few fancy galleries; no Orozco, Pittman, Rhoades, McCarthy, Barney, Pierson, Sherman, or Williams, to name just a few big-ticket artists found in previous installments. Abjection takes a holiday, and in general, there is less media-influenced work than I can remember in any recent survey; neither the culture of complaint nor the society of the spectacle is much in evidence.

