

PRAGMATIC HEDONISM

The pleasant surprise of the new, in two big surveys.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

To gauge contemporary art in times that lack intellectual edge and stylistic direction, check the going level of mediocrity: the always teeming range of merit between the pretty good and the not so hot. That stratum is unusually lofty at the moment, as witness the new Whitney Biennial and its sudden rival, an unprecedented, huge group show called "Greater New York" at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, the Long Island City queen of American alternative spaces and now an affiliate of the Museum of Modern Art. If this sounds like praise so faint that only a dog could hear it, sue me. These are strange days—vibrant with a creative energy that, while short on majesty, is long on optimism. If you can muster a spirit of tolerant interest pitched to the uncertain rewards of what is on offer in new art, you will have fun—and something more, a whiff of cultural trends—in New York right now.

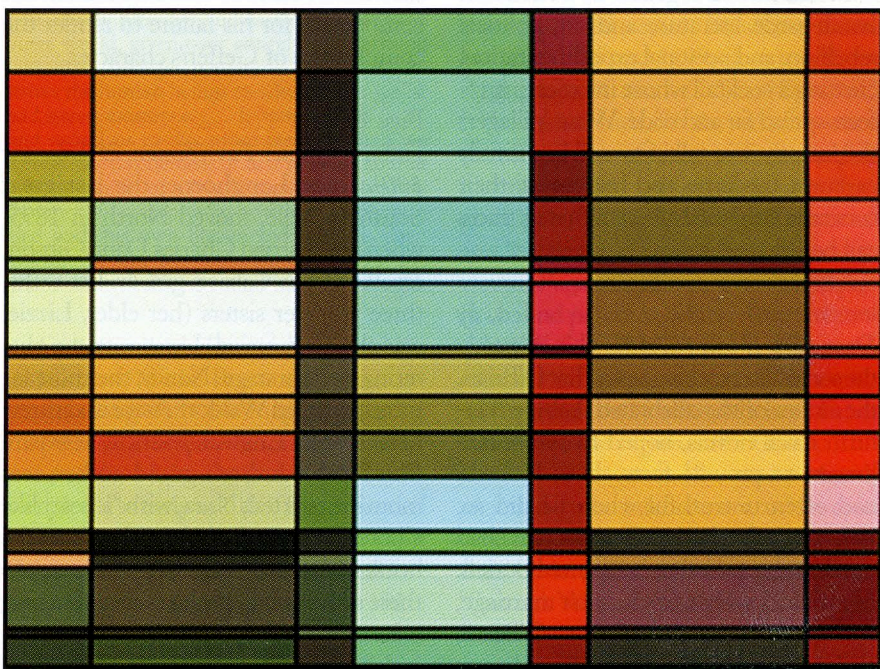
For this Biennial, the first under the leadership of the recently appointed director, Maxwell L. Anderson, the Whitney enlisted a committee of six outside curators to select its complement of ninety-seven American or America-based artists in painting, sculpture, installation, photography, video, and film. (I'm old enough to remember when, in vernacular use, the word "art" meant painting. If you meant sculpture, you said "sculpture." Now art denotes, at minimum, anything on the game farm of any art institution.) For "Greater New York," thirty staffers of P.S. 1 and MOMA considered thousands of mostly young locals—in a field loosely closed to those who achieved prominence before 1995—and settled favor on about a hundred and forty. There are just six overlaps between the two shows: the sculptor Chakaia Booker and the installation artist E. V. Day, the video artists Shirin Neshat and Paul Pfeiffer, the painter Lisa Yuskavage, and the embroidery artist Ghada Amer. The Biennial will run through June 4th,

"Greater New York" through May 16th.

Though the P.S. 1 show is inevitably spottier than the surprisingly unexceptionable Biennial, its roundup is more enjoyable, for reasons that bear on American art's present dispensation. It is less starchily official in feeling—closer to the zest-

you like better than you do and imparting it with panache. Such pragmatic hedonism registers more keenly in P.S. 1's shaggy ramble than it does, museologically gussied up, at the Whitney, but it is unmistakable at the Whitney, too.

This Biennial's overblown aura—as of lyric poems being palmed off as epics—is amusing in itself. It is riotous on the museum's gravely palatial fourth floor, where some essentially intimate stylists must pretend to swagger. They do so amiably, evincing a flexibility among current artists that replaces the avant-gardish truculences of yesteryear. Sarah Sze, an installational sculptor who or-



Jeremy Blake's "Angel Dust" (2000), a video piece of cyclical snowfall at P.S. 1: High craftsmanship and humble ambitions mark the new art of today.

ful serendipity of artists' studios—at a time when creative sap is running backward from art's public branches to its personal and small-constituency roots. Art today waits upon the idiosyncratic decisions of artists as at no other moment that I can remember. Increasingly, the decisions demonstrate mature, no-big-deal connections with both art history and popular culture. The old distinctions between "high" and "low" haven't blurred; they've evaporated. Ambitious ideas are out. Humble principles are in, notably a professional dedication to pleasing viewers. When not aesthetically exalted—which is most of the time, I'm afraid—new art is reliably entertaining, with an air of knowing what

chestrates myriad tiny objects with frenetic daintiness, obligingly tricks out an immense space that surrounds the museum's walled front window. Ingrid Calame, who derives abstract paintings from found patterns of stains on the streets of Los Angeles, delivers a what-the-hell, vast sheet of transparent Mylar daubed with orange enamel. (It is nonchalantly ravishing.) And twelve laconic little abstractions on raw plywood, by the veteran intimist Richard Tuttle, are hung in a row to generate a misleading but agreeably potent rhythm. The effect of these funny inflations is very 2000, I think: aesthetic trifles occupying a space that dreams of Richard Serra.

For compensatory ballast, the representation of each artist at the Whitney comes with a wordy wall text that is often supererogatory in the extreme, though perhaps savvy about the museum's audience. At one point, a stranger turned to me, pointed at one such label, and said, "Did you read that? It makes sense of this!" I would have thought that "this"—a tidy array of Mexican and Tex-Mex curios by Franco Mondini-Ruiz—made more than enough sense without any help, but I just smiled. Notable in the texts is a hair-trigger eagerness to adduce social and political significance of a kind that was obligatory in the nineteen-nineties but that has become scarce in up-to-date art. These days, whatever ideology manifests itself is mostly vestigial, as when an occasional female artist takes active interest in the fact that she is a woman. You can call this feminism, but it hardly needs to be called anything. In my happy view, what Robert Hughes decried, not so long ago, as the whiny "culture of complaint" is rapidly succumbing to a culture of resolute candor.

Proving this rule at the Whitney is the sore-thumb exception of Hans Haacke's much publicized agitprop installation, a presentation of censorious remarks on art by Rudy Giuliani, among others, in a Gothic typeface and with a soundtrack—marching feet—that evokes Nazism. Haacke has been battered for this piece, which would have passed unremarked in the benchmark, complaint-crazed Biennial of 1993. He has been charged with trivializing the Holocaust, of all obviously unintended things—an instance of unfair attack that, in his case, amounts to poetic justice. Throughout a long career of hothouse radicalism, Haacke has specialized in just such blindsiding smears. It's easy: make a hyperbolic association of something vile to some unsuspecting party and treat it as objective evidence of iniquity. This works when people are in a mood to be fanatically partisan. No such mood exists among today's young artists, who seem more inclined to relish their liberty than to wax hysterical over some politician's posturing hostility.

The locus of artistic freedom now is art itself, which is apparent in all the blooming sophistication about the uses of mediums and genres. Our new artists industriously fit tasks to tools.

The most availing mediums are video and painting. Video has come of age after three decades of mostly gimcrack novelty (aside from the lonely mastery of Bruce Nauman). It is an instrument as matter-of-fact as a pencil to artists who have grown up with its capacity to manipulate pictorial experience in architectural space and musical time. Jeremy Blake, at P.S. 1, and Shirin Neshat and Paul Pfeiffer, who are in both shows, stand out. To sounds of roaring wind, Blake's projection of falling snow slowly fills with gridded blocks of changing colors, which then fade to begin the cycle anew. This beautiful piece recalls Harold Rosenberg's classic wisecrack about color-field painting: "apocalyptic wallpaper." Neshat's elegant, two-screen meditations on the culture of the chador in Islamic Iran emit an icy heat of suppressed passions; they are among the first undoubtable masterpieces of video installation. Pfeiffer's silent, tiny projections of basketball action harvested from TV broadcasts—balls tracked in incessant flight, a player caught in a rictus of triumph or agony—rivet the eye and the mind with almost punishing rapture.

While video has risen in artistic prestige, painting has declined, much to its advantage. No longer burdened with the job of symbolizing art as such, the old medium proves indispensable in the skilled hands of artists whose intentions require degrees of nuance that no other visual means can rival. As often as not, these intentions are erotic in character and decadent in drift. Elizabeth Peyton's pretty boys, at P.S. 1, and Lisa Yuskavage's dysfunctional girls, in both shows, seem to me inexcusable except when I am looking at them, whereupon their insinuating eloquence takes my breath away. The same goes for the insolent John Currin, whose three paintings at the Whitney—cruelly satirical contemporary scenes of boys together and girls together, and a Northern Renaissance-style pastiche of two nude women—flirt with greatness as their subtleties of manner and meaning sink in. Among the paintings not to be missed at P.S. 1 are small watercolors of suburban pathos by Tim Gardner, a striking newcomer this season, and a satisfying canvas by the giddily hyped Cecily Brown, whose recent display, at the Gagosian Gallery, of

painterly bravura for its own sake was disappointing. Here, Brown's infectious brush kicks up a proper froth around the image of a copulating couple.

Installational art, the putatively cutting-edge mode of the nineties, seems weary all of a sudden—an excessively labor-intensive way to engage viewers. Still, some installations at the Whitney, including an enchantingly feminized old sports car by Kim Dingle, prove worth their trouble. Current sculpture seems in a bad, aimless way, apart from finely chilling works by Robert Gober—wax children's legs protruding from a sink—and such odd tours de force as a gorgeously materialized fiction about Venetian glass design by Josiah McElheny. Both of these artists are in the Biennial. Abstract painting, the fabulous invalid of contemporary art, rests more than comfortably at the Whitney in jewel-like, infinitely sensitive monochromes by Joseph Marioni. This leaves photography, lately a robust medium that, for some reason, is represented so skimpily in both shows that singling any photographer out for praise would slight the legion of the excluded. O.K., there's also computer stuff—mired in its infatuation with effects that will appear primitive in a few years, if not months. You can't hurry art.

These rich, ebullient shows leach most of the pejorative toxins from my over-all verdict of mediocrity. But let the verdict stand, because something crucial to ultimate excellence is missing. The craft and finesse with which our artists now do whatever they set out to do should make us proud to be American. What's absent is depth of a kind that no artist, however gifted and serious, can provide without the encouragement—or the resistance—of society at large. In these boom times, American cultural appetites are at once exacting and permissive. Demanding superb pleasures, we nurture peak performances in popular entertainment, decoration, design, and the middle ranges of the fine arts. Left untouched, as we skim along, are the higher and lower realms—the aspirations and the sufferings of human experience. Our aversion to extremes prohibits the extraordinary. But we can't have everything, and we may well be nostalgic for this steely, insouciant era when it's gone. ♦