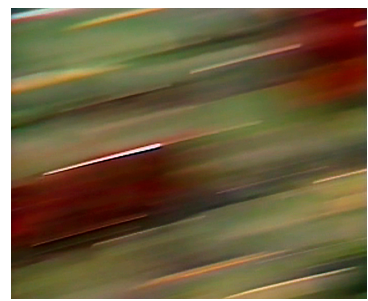
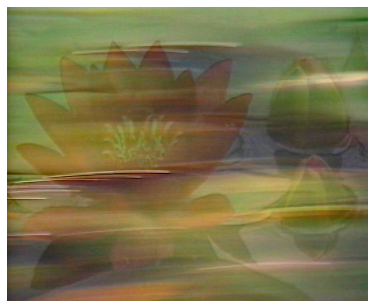


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WHY THE LATEST WHITNEY BIENNIAL IS MORE SATISFYING

By JOHN RUSSELL

SEVERAL times this week I have caught myself using a form of words not often heard in New York City - "I did so enjoy the Whitney Biennial." In saying this, I did not forget that there never was yet a mixed exhibition that pleased everyone. All the way back to the Armory Show in New York in 1913 and the Salon des Refuses in Paris in 1863, there have been people who beefed. If it wasn't the artists who were in the show that they complained about, it was the artists who were left out. As in other departments of life, the very act of choosing is offensive. It is, as a veteran statesman once said, "Every time I appoint a new minister, I make myself 19 enemies and have to work side by side with a monster of ingratitude."

This was true of the major exhibitions of last year in Europe - Kassel, Venice, Berlin and Amsterdam - and it is doubtless true of the Corcoran Biennial in Washington (to be reviewed on Sunday in the Arts and Leisure section). It has often been true of the Whitney Biennial, which this year enters upon its second half-century of existence. No matter how much care, thought and footwork went into the Whitney Biennial, it often ended up with a random, formless, idea-less look, thereby incurring widespread castigation.

There is however a considerable tautening in the character of the present Biennial. Not too many artists are involved, for one thing. For another, there is a serious attempt to deal both with photography as it overlaps with art and with video. In other areas, there is a distinct move toward work that is environmental in scale. The show fills not only the second and fourth floors of the Whitney, but also a number of crannies and crevices elsewhere. It has static images of a traditional sort, and it has images that flicker, come and go, dance around and talk. (Among the unconventional images, a particular charm attaches to a disembodied hand that Bill Lundberg has persuaded to play patience on a small corner table).

As in earlier years, the show represents a collective effort on the part of the Whitney's curators, whose names on this occasion and in alphabetical order are John G. Hanhardt, Barbara Haskell, Richard Marshall and Patterson Sims. They were faced with the perpetual problem of the Biennial,

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which is that the spring visitor from out of town counts on seeing the work of the big seniors who live in New York, while the New Yorker goes in hopes of seeing new faces from all over the country.

If I concentrate here on the new faces, it is not because the more familiar ones are off form, but because it is not every day that we see big work by Melissa Miller (born 1951 in Texas), Mike Glier (born 1953 in Kentucky), Jenny Holzer (born 1950 in Ohio), Lance Kiland (born 1947 in North Dakota), Barbara Kruger (born 1945 in New Jersey), Mary Lucier (born 1945 in Ohio), Bill Lundberg (born 1942 in California), Philip Mayberry (born 1951 in Texas), T.L. Solien (born 1949 in North Dakota) and Mark Tansey (born 1949 in California).

What these people may be presumed to have in common is that they were not reared in New York, though some of them now live here. Rather than lose myself in huge speculation on the implications of this, I will say simply that it was not in New York that their sensibility was formed. And although Jenny Holzer has as strong a line in verbal invective as almost anyone around, these artists do not on the whole have the jackhammer drive that is the mark of many a young New Yorker.

Like more than one other painter in the show, for instance, Melissa Miller has something of Malcolm Morley in her pictorial idiom. (Morley is still a British subject and cannot, therefore, be shown at the Whitney). Her standing rabbit with an escort of polar bears, her tigers and dancing monkeys, her bears and serpents - all have something of Morley's offhand way with anatomy. But whereas Morley uses the brush with the action of a man prying open an oyster, Miss Miller in "Northern Lights" slides the paint into place, trusting that our sense of fantasy will rhyme with hers.

This is not, by the way, the only thing in the show that might have started life in an unserious variant of the American Museum of Natural History. T.L. Solien's environmental piece "The Animal Husband" is a prime example of this. Contradictions of scale and perversions of space make it one of the oddest and most arresting pieces that have lately come our way. To see a life-size bull swimming up to its neck in water in what looks to be quite a small living room is not a sight to be passed up lightly.

Rather than go step by step through rooms in which I found more to enjoy than to grouse about, I shall give just two more reasons why you should go to the Biennial. One came as a shock to me, in that I have had a lifelong allergy to video in most of its forms and rather wish that Monet's garden at Giverny had been allowed to live on in his paintings alone, rather than as a simulacrum, no matter how painstaking.

"Ohio at Giverny" by Mary Lucier consists of two videotapes, each lasting 20 minutes, with sparing but intensely evocative added sound. The visitor looks at seven screens simultaneously. Subtly varied in size, they are arranged, not side by side, but in an unfinished arch. The images move up, down and across them.

What we see relates mostly to the reconstructed garden, but it also takes in the view from a ground-floor window in Monet's house, an archetypal French small town half asleep in high summer, and a railroad track complete with thunderous train. Church bells, nature noises and scraps of music thicken the plot. The image is disintegrated and reintegrated in ways that can be read as a subliminal reference to Monet's failing sight.

What may sound like a travelogue, seemed to this visitor to have a poetry without precedent. It is hard to know which to admire most - the shifting movement of the sevenfold image, the implications of memory, renewal and loss, the sudden stab of sound or the blessed freedom from banality.

As is usual in the Whitney Biennial, there are paintings and sculptures by artists who are regularly seen in New York. Among them, Louise Bourgeois stands out on this occasion for a piece in which she breaks new ground. Jasper Johns, Jonathan Borofsky, Nancy Graves, Joan Mitchell, Robert Mangold, Susan Rothenburg, Julian Schnabel and David Salle are also strongly represented.

If I single out Richard Artschwager among the artists of the middle generation, it is because it would be easy to miss his contribution altogether. To find it, we must pass through an unmarked door, whereupon we find ourselves in what seems to be a king-size corporate elevator. When the door swings shut behind us, we realize that the elevator appears to have no doors.

It does, however, have two buttons, one for up and the other for down. Pressing "Up," we hear a disquieting series of animal noises, as if beasts of prey were waiting for us at our destination. Pressing "Down," we get an even more alarming series of noises. The contrast between the bland corporate image and the imminence of the jungle is a masterstroke of theater, and one that only Artschwager would have devised.

All this and much else can be seen at the Whitney Museum, Madison Avenue and 75th Street, through May 22. The second floor and the video programs in the lobby gallery can be see through May 29.

Hours are 11 A.M. to 6 P.M., Wednesdays through Saturdays; to 8 P.M. on Tuesdays, and noon to 6 on Sundays and holidays. Admission is \$2.50; \$1.25 for the elderly, and free for those younger than 12, accompanied by an adult, for college students with identification, and for everyone on Tuesdays after 6 P.M. Information: 570-3600.

Illustrations: photo of Melissa Miller painting (page C26)
