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WHITNEY WATCH

by Ben Davis

Yesterday's low-key press conference for the upcoming **Whitney Biennial**, Feb. 25-May 30, 2010, was pretty much a success, with the show's two curators -- the museum's own **Gary Carrion-Murayati** and globetrotting guest-curator **Francesco Bonami** -- giving off a relaxed and articulate vibe.

Laconically titled "2010," the biennial could certainly use a little more buzz.

The comparative lack of frisson reflects the straightened times we live in -- the art-world champagne has lost some of its fizz since 2008's messy, multi-part "Facebook Biennial" or the ambitious, conceptually intricate 2006 installment, "Day for Night." We are living in an age of continuously lowered expectations, and "2010" is being billed in similarly modest terms.

The heretofore little-known Carrion-Murayati -- he helped out with the Whit's **Rudolf Stingel** exhibition, among others -- came across as scholarly and earnest, with a thorough grip on the biennial's history and current situation. Bonami, meanwhile, was funny and commanding, in a self-deprecating sort of way. "We won't tell you too much," he joked to the assembled critics. "We won't spoil your craving for blood."

The press event took place on the Whitney's fifth floor, where "Collecting Biennials" had quietly opened a few weeks before; this prequel/homage to the museum's 75-year-old signature survey features works from the collection by artists who have been in past biennials, and presents the museum's holdings in a notably good light.

Bonami, however, took the opportunity to sound a reflective note, indicating that "Collecting Biennials" was not, as one might think, about showing off all the great stuff the Whitney has in storage, but rather offered a lesson: "not everything in a biennial holds up with time." He gestured to a huge, colorful, macho **Julian Schnabel** painting on velvet from the 1980s, "For example. . ." (he hastened to add, diplomatically, that he actually really likes Schnabel).

Asked whether "2010" sought to respond to the recent competing surveys, like "Younger than Jesus" or "Greater New York," Bonami offered one of the few moments of bravado. "'Greater New York' is something they used to say when I first moved here, as in 'New York used to be so much greater. . .'" But then he went on, using a racing metaphor, to admit that the Whitney Biennial was probably positioned "behind the curve," though he argued this was desirable. "If you're right on the curve, we know, you either crash or are surpassed." Carrion-Murayati interjected that the Whit's Biennial still had the virtue, compared to its rivals, of being "inter-generational."

Bonami has received his share of disastrous reviews: his epic, hydra-headed 2003 **Venice Biennale**, "The Dictatorship of the Spectator," was deemed an over-ambitious monster; he engaged in an embarrassing public **spat** with **Robert Storr** over the latter man's 2007 Venice Biennale, which had Storr calling Bonami "a clown who had lost his timing"; his sweeping "Italics" show of Italian art, now on view at the **Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago**, has been derided as haphazard.

In response to such blows, Bonami seems to have developed an instinct for preemptively deflating expectations (he obliquely mentioned the bad reviews he has received several times). Strange to say, but this temperament is actually a strength when it comes to curating a high-profile survey in recessionary times -- it is precisely towards defensive, self-critical art, and away from sprawling experimentation, that he has steered "2010." The spirit represented by the selected artists, he said, was that "you change your own self first as a way, maybe, to change the world."

As everyone has noted, "2010" is smaller than surveys past, with just 55 artists, compared to 81 in 2008 and 100 in 2006. The museum's third floor will be dedicated to film and video ("feel free to skip it," Bonami said, "if you don't like film or video"); a few installations and performances will be delegated to other parts of the space. The show also once again focuses on "American" art, after straying a bit into the international arena in previous years.

Shrinking the size of the exhibition sounds like a cost-saving move. The curators dismissed such speculation, saying that they had always sought to do a more focused survey. In any case, from an esthetic point of view, the thinned program is framed as humility: a guiding principal was "not all artists who are good need to be in the biennial," Bonami offered.

Four artists shared the stage with the "2010" curators: **Nina Berman**, **Theaster Gates**, **Sharon Hayes** and **Rashaad Newsome**. How representative they may be of the show as a whole is not clear, but as a crew they represent art of a poetically anthropological bent. The Chicago-based Gates is presenting a "Brutalist, Buddhist shoeshine stand," a tribute to an actual stand, Shine King, on Chicago's West Side (where he did a smaller version of the same piece). Berman, a photojournalist, is exhibiting a series of 17 photographs following the post-war course of an Iraq War veteran. Hayes is presenting *Parole*, videos exploring queer identity via an enigmatic "figure who records sounds but never speaks." Newsome, finally, plans a tribute to "voguing," the well-known dance form developed by African-American and Latino gay communities (with a performance scheduled for the museum's lobby gallery).

All of these projects represent worthy themes. Grouping them together adds up to a modest defense of the institution's value as a place where art can express some kind of social mission, above and beyond simple taste-making for the art market. It is nice to see the Whitney not retreating into formalism or "return to beauty" kinds of formulae -- though, it should be noted, the actual program includes a large helping of straight-ahead decorative painting, e.g. **Verne Dawson**, **Suzan Frecon**, **Maureen Gallace**, **Jim Lutes**.

At the tail end of the conference, I got to speak a bit with Gates, who is infectiously enthusiastic about what he does. He was in the process of assembling his shoeshine installation in the Whitney courtyard, which is currently filled with heaps of lumber. I asked him if the museum was picking up the tab for the installation, and he cheerfully replied "not really," adding that the curators "pick the project, and when they pick you, they sort of trust you to be able to realize it" (according to Gates, the museum is underwriting the performances that accompany the work, featuring the **Black Monks of Mississippi**).

Gates said that he had rustled up funding from a few backers and pulled in some support from the **University of Chicago**, where he teaches. It's exactly the kind of situation that has recently turned into an actual activist campaign led by the New York group, **W.A.G.E. (Working Artists in the General Economy)**, which advocates that museums pay fees to artists for exhibiting their work. Gates, nonetheless, is excited to get his crack at the Whitney (though he did mention that his project manager tasks made him feel like a "bureaucrat.") Pressing ahead in challenging economic circumstances is what "2010" is all about.

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