

## Print Article



Biennial curators Henriette Huldish (left) and Shamim M. Momin watch Whitney director Adam Weinberg address the press



Jedediah Caesar's *Helium Brick aka Summer Snow* (2006) in the 2008 Whitney Biennial



Installation view of Rachel Harrison's work at the 2008 Whitney Biennial



Sculptures by Charles Long in the 2008 Whitney Biennial

## RAVE ON

### by Ben Davis

"The Whitney Biennial 2008," Mar. 6-June 1, 2008, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10021

I'm sympathetic to the folks who organize the Whitney Biennial. You devote yourself to a high-pressure, immensely complicated project for months and months, and then the critics are done with it in a moment.

The show opened yesterday, Mar. 6, 2008, and the early returns are already in. The *New York Sun's* David Cohen was first out of the gate -- and probably the most sympathetic -- calling it "a boho biennial" with "a neo-hippie ethos." Holland Cotter in the *New York Times* described the biennial as "hermetic, uningratiating," full of "uncharismatic surfaces, complicated back stories." Alexandra Peers, wisecracking her way through the opening for *New York* magazine, summed up the whole thing as "tentative and half-done."

And indeed, the dominant sense you get is of things half-finished or things falling apart. Oakland sculptor Jedediah Caesar presents a giant, inert brick of multicolored resin, and the text explains his precociously leaden object by noting that he's more "interested in materials themselves than in constructing sculptures with them."

A room installation by Rachel Harrison features a row of framed collages and a boxy, diamond-checked sculpture that holds a film projector, which projects *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* against the wall, below waist level -- an ensemble that, characteristically for Harrison, adds up to less than the sum of its parts.

A ramshackle wood-frame contraption by Phoebe Washburn incorporates aquariums, hoses, golf balls and a mini-fridge, and a room of skinny gray golems by Charles Long does Giacometti in papier-mâché (in the shape of heron dung). More skeletal constructions of wood, cinderblock and other materials are contributed by William Cordova, Ruben Ochoa, Mitzi Pederson, Mika Rottenberg, Heather Rowe, Lisa Sigal, Mika Tajima and several other artists.

I don't doubt that curators Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin are picking up on a real zeitgeist for diaphanous, under-produced work and performance-based art -- the very similar "Unmonumental" at the New Museum proves as much. Still, I don't know about this "Neo-Hippie Biennial" thing -- the artists involved in this show are too cynical and not idealistic enough by half to be hippie-like.

However, I will give it this -- the whole thing does seem to represent an interest in homeopathic medicine! That is, it offers to simulate a negative effect to cure the larger disease; as if to fend off harsh critical attacks, the show embraces a defensive self-abasement. It is willfully half-baked.



Heather Rowe's *Something crossed the mind (embellished three times)* (right) and Rodney McMillian's *Untitled* (center rear) along with Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin addressing a television crew



Phoebe Washburn's *While Enhancing a Diminishing Dep Down Thirst, the Juice Broke Loose (the Birth of a Soda Shop)* (2008) in the 2008 Whitney Biennial



Phoebe Washburn's *While Enhancing. . .* (detail) in the 2008 Whitney Biennial



Installation view of Stephen Prina's *The Second Sentence of Everything I Read Is You: The Queen Mary* (1979-2006) in the 2008 Whitney Biennial



Every two years, the Whitney Biennial comes under the gun for being too political, or not political enough, or too academic, or too commercial, and so on. Whitney director Adam Weinberg seemed well aware of the coming flood of critical abuse during his opening remarks during the exhibition's press preview. Weinberg practically begged the assembled critics to be considerate. The show "reveals itself slowly," he said, and it should be seen "not just once but multiple times." He exhorted journalists to remember how many hours each artist put into their work. *For god's sake, think of the artists! Give this relationship a little more time!*

Critics savaged the 2006 Whitney Biennial for being too punk and pretentious, too baggy and grandiose, with its play at a themed show -- "Day for Night," it was called -- commenting on the decline of the American empire and the dawn of post-national culture.

Looking to be loved, the 2008 edition ditches any pretensions towards a title (and the concomitant theme), along with notions of border-busting "post-nationalism." Instead, Huldish and Momin have returned to a vibe that seems defiantly local. Most of the artists are good-old New Yorkers, and many of the rest come from California.

In this light, the 2008 Whitney Biennial's sense of being half-digested, incomplete and broken suddenly appears like a preemptive strike against criticism. Don't think it adds up to much? Well, that's the point! Ditto the performative aspect, including the events and installations at the nearby Park Avenue Armory, an expansion of the show that was introduced this year with much fanfare. Both there but also at the Whitney, the various art objects and installations seem less like discrete, finished works than leftovers from a really good party, and, you know, you had to be there.

In curator-speak, these strategies represent an opening towards an "expanded field of art." But they also mark a closure, a defensive inward turn. In Stephen Prina's installation, a kind of budget lounge area -- mostly consisting of low platforms covered with carpet -- has speakers projecting a musical composition the artist made by stringing together excerpts from a Felix Gonzales-Torres catalogue. Boards leaning against scuffed-up seating offer "special thanks to Ben Bernake, Holland Cotter, Ken Johnson, Jon Pareles, Roberta Smith, Stacie Slotnick, Mayo Thompson, Lynne Tillman, Guy Trebay and Wendy Yao." This snarky formulation equates art critics and other tastemakers with the very unpopular head of the Federal Reserve. Prina seems to be saying that they are the bureaucrats managing value out there, and doing it badly.

It would be unfair to call the biennial totally inward-directed. It has plenty of politics, and addresses the big themes. Some of it is bad, like Daniel J. Martinez's room full of gold plaques with the names of different "groups that use violence," a gesture that has no meaning besides conflating the politics of real organizations with very different agendas, like Hezbollah and Al Qaeda, at a time when a little political clarity would help. But some are eloquent, like Julia Meltzer and David Thorne's two video collaborations with Syrian actor Rami Farah, gentle and poetic soliloquies that are full of humanity.

On the whole, however, this show doesn't claim to represent the "State of Things" as much as to give the viewer a chance to sit at the table with a specific crowd and see what's on their mind. As has been noted, the show's focus on "social networks" really means a focus on people who know each other. This may be a nod towards utopian communitarianism, or simply the reproduction of a clique, or maybe both.

During the press preview at the Park Avenue Armory, for instance, Ellen Harvey was doing a performance for which she made and

displayed sketches of 100 people who signed up to get their portrait done. As a gesture, this is big-hearted and sociable -- but also, I'd wager, the first 100 people will tend to be insiders and associates, those who got the email invite and signed up first. When I was there, it was a critic from *Art in America*.

Other chambers, with sets for pieces by Bozidar Brazda, Kembra Pfaler, Eduardo Sarabia, Mario Ybarra Jr. and others, were like rooms at some themed nightclub, minus the crowds. Ascending a staircase into an attic set-up by Gregor Asch -- aka DJ Olive, the Audio Janitor -- red lights and rubble abounded. A guitar pick attached to a turntable knocked rhythmically against a guitar. It had a haunted-house feeling.

The huge, vaguely disheveled hall seemed to percolate with energy, as if it were the setting for some art-world rave that was just around the corner. Somehow, I don't think that this is the kind of "rave review" that the Whitney might be hoping for, but it is something.

<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/reviews/davis/davis3-7-08.asp?print=1>



Environment by Kambra Pfaler at the Park Avenue Armory



Turn table and guitar, part of an environment by DJ Olive at the Park Avenue Armory



The Drill Hall at the Park Avenue Armory, with light works by Gretchen Skogerson