

# Arts

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## The Simple Life.

The art market is in love with glitz. Maybe that's why artists are having an affair with the humble



*An Ideal Disjuncture, 2008 Ruben Ochoa*

BY RICHARD LACAYO

THINK OF THE MOST THANKLESS JOBS OUT there. Slaughterhouse cleaner. Involuntary drug tester. Russell Crowe's assistant. Here's one that's worse: curator of the Whitney Biennial. Every two years, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City attempts a survey of current trends among American artists across the U.S. and based abroad. Every two years, or just about, the whole thing gets terrible reviews.

In some ways this is inevitable. Compared with art's history, which is largely sorted out, the present is always a mess, full of dwarf stars and bit players. Any of the moment show is guaranteed to bring those in by the carload. It doesn't help that in some years the Biennial's organizers have had a weakness for the slapdash and infantile, and in others for the most school-marmish kind of political correctness.

Moreover, recent Biennials have had

to respond somehow to the provocation of a superheated art market. Even if gallery owners and collectors have gotten a little nervous lately, whistling past the twin graveyards of housing and stocks, money remains a force to be reckoned with. Month after month, deluxe aesthetic merchandise—the stainless-steel jewelry sculpture by Jeff Koons, those naughty-nurse paintings by Richard Prince—keeps rolling out of auction houses like so many hood ornaments.

One of the results of this is that the art world has reacted, producing in some quarters a deliberately low intensity art of humble materials and transient gestures. This is the quarter that the latest Biennial is coming from. The 2008 edition, which was organized by Whitney curators Henriette Huldich and Shamim M. Momin, has no official theme. But one of its unofficial themes is what the pair calls “lessness”—work that's less bombastic,

less puffed up and made with simple stuff.

Like a lot of people, I also hate what the market has done to the experience of art, substituting the verdict of cash for every other judgment. But when I first heard that this year's Biennial would be heavy on humble art, I winced. Small potatoes is a dish that the art world circles back to every decade or so, usually out of revulsion at a gluttonous market. The go-go gallery salesrooms of the 1960s led to the rise of deliberately unsalable performance art and earthworks. And the 1993 Biennial, the first to follow the Reagan-Bush era, featured work that its catalog solemnly promised “deliberately renounces success and power in favor of the degraded and the dysfunctional.”

And then there is today's wave of success-renouncing, degradation-favoring art, much of which takes the form of listless flotsam-assemblage sculpture, things built from chunks of Styrofoam, torn cardboard or bits of twisted wire. It's piled together with some measure of deliberation, but who can tell how much? Its heart may be in the right place, but it emits an awfully faint pulse.

So one question for this Biennial, which runs through June 1, and for art at large, is whether lessness can amount to more than that. Without question, there's a tumble-down, slacker spirit among some of the 81 artists that Huldich and Momin have selected. Yet they also chose just enough work in which the materials may be humble but the ambitions are larger. New York artist Heather Rowe has adapted ideas from the late Gordon Matta-Clark, who sawed entire houses into parts to expose their strange and poignant innards. Rowe builds her own wooden frameworks, embedded with shards of mirrors and bits of vagrant molding, that create memory mazes, which double as Minimalist sculpture.

Sculptor Ruben Ochoa, based in Los Angeles, operates in the great modernist tradition of junk assemblage that goes back to Picasso. Ochoa builds his work out of suitably despised things: broken concrete, rebar, chain-link fencing—the rubbishy stuff of construction sites. But he combines those elements to create ceiling-height formations that have a brutal grandeur. *An Ideal Disjuncture*, 2008, brings to mind the swells of Baroque form, but with materials so scrappy, they couldn't fall into the suave clichés of Baroque art if they tried.

Jason Rhoades was not one for small statements either. By the time he died of heart failure two years ago at the age of 41, he had built a reputation as a one-man barbaric yawp. His sprawling installations were teeming, swaggering, messy, obscene, obscure and beyond sexist. In



*Six Houses on Mound Street*, 2006 Robert Bechtle



*The Grand Machine/THEAREOLA*, 2002 Jason Rhoades



**Cavalry, 2007** Joe Bradley

their superabundant way, they were also irresistible. His 2002 funfest, *The Grand Machine/THEAREOLA*, which gets its own spacious room at the Whitney, is a meditation on '70s porn star Marilyn Chambers incorporated into a sort of ramshackle karaoke-CD factory.

What you won't find much of in this Biennial is painting—one reason the show starts to feel parched after a while. So it was with gratitude that I came across 75-year-old Robert Bechtle. Forty years ago, he emerged as one of the first photo-realists. Working from slides that he projected onto canvas, he produced "photographic" scenes of suburbia at its most prosaic, or of San Francisco streets at their most matter-of-fact and unpicturesque. It's customary now to compare him with Edward Hopper. Like Hopper, Bechtle has a gift for finding the melancholy note in sunlight itself, as well as for the abstract underpinnings of the world. In *Six Houses on Mound Street*, 2006, with its stark cubes and fretwork of painted crosswalks, the workaday scene seems to be held in place by the guy-wires of some enigmatic order.

Then there are Joe Bradley's big bright canvases, such as *Cavalry*, 2007, which combine the resolutely abstract boxes and

rectangles of Minimalist and color-field painting into cartoon-character formations. It's a bit of an art-history joke, and one that sculptor Joel Shapiro played with more than 20 years ago in 3-D. But Bradley's ferocious colors and color contrasts give his work a weirdly commanding presence, one made weirder still by all those infantile silhouettes.

Where this year's Biennial goes out on a limb is in the decision to devote a separate venue to shared social experiences defined as artworks. These include a 24-hour dance marathon, a Gypsy-themed feast and a slumber party. Momin and Huldish say this kind of evanescent "event art" is another manifestation of the recoil from the market, and that it's so widespread across the U.S. that no survey show can ignore it. To accommodate this, for its first three weeks, the Biennial is spilling over to the Park Avenue Armory, a Victorian brick pile a few blocks from the museum that offers room after room of wood-paneled

chambers with brass chandeliers and mounted moose heads. In other words, it's a party space. In one of the oaky rooms, the Los Angeles artist Eduardo Sarabia has opened a tequila bar. He made the blue-and-white-ceramic bar stand. He made the bottles. He even made the tequila. The press materials explain that it's not just a bar but an installation that "celebrates collaborative dialogue and community." In other words, a bar. You provide the hang-over, your very own contribution to the "social performance" artwork.

Even evanescent events have a kind of art-history pedigree. Dada, the anti-art phenomenon that grew out of disgust for World War I, was as much a café phenomenon as it was an art movement. And more recently there has been Rirkrit Tiravanija, the Thai artist best known for cooking and serving meals for visitors at his gallery shows, at which the art was the shared experience of the meal. To serve and nourish, and to reflect on it while you are doing it, in a world that's gotten used to performance art—maybe that can be art too. But to party? We'll see. I've practiced that art myself. I had a great time, but I doubt that I did anything memorable. Or if I did, I can't remember it. ■



**Steady Art Beat**

Check out a video view of the Whitney Biennial hosted by Richard Lacayo at [time.com](http://time.com)