

A walking meditation: The 2012 Whitney Biennial

Amy Karafin

THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL HAS BECOME NOTORIOUS for the grandstanding artists and enfants terribles who usually take its spotlight. For a change, this year's biennial was quiet and thoughtful, with those art-world darlings having been passed over for a small number (around fifty) of artists' artists, who presented unassuming, smart, moving work. There were marionettes, monotypes, embroidery, small paintings, dancing, slide shows of projectionists' diagrams and tiny pictures of outer space.

The show was as elusive as it was poignant: exhibits shifted, opened and closed so much with the time of day, week and month that it was impossible to see everything. The talking robotic teenager of Gisèle Vienne's *Last spring: a prequel* was turned off during play rehearsals in a nearby hall. Dawn Kasper, whose actual studio comprised *This could be something if I let it*, may have been working or wandering around the museum when you arrived – or not. Wu Tsang's *GREEN ROOM* installation occasionally closed to become a dressing room for biennial performers. Videos, residencies and performances ran for a week, or a day, throughout the exhibition. A player piano turned on at 2 p.m. for a few minutes. The show wasn't huge but it was slippery, in a way that left you feeling pleasantly powerless: the biennial couldn't be possessed.

The space of the museum also shifted with the work. Instead of challenging the museum's white box, this biennial played with it instead. So the music of Lutz Bacher's *Pipe organ*, 2009–11, a delightful cross between a war march and a cartoon accompaniment, resonated through the second floor, creating a soundtrack for nearby exhibits. Elaine Reichel's quiet embroidered work fought with Rolling Stones songs coming from Kasper's work next door. Nick Mauss displayed pieces from the Whitney's permanent collection in his area, sampling them like a DJ. And in *Portal*, by the multidisciplinary band The Red Krayola, one of the group's artists was teleported into the gallery via Skype for conversation with museum-goers.

The exhibition's sprawl, its flux and lack of boundaries, perfectly complemented the restraint of much of the work. The biennial did have some purely fun moments: Sam Lewitt corralled wind, magnets and evaporation to make ferromagnetic liquid squirm like sea anemones in *Fluid employment*, 2012, for example. But for the most part the work was sober and earnest, like Tom Thayer's meditative set of videos and mixed-media work. *Considering the moons and stars*, 2011, a simple collage of a bird under a blue moon, had the calm self-containment and delicacy of a Japanese landscape painting. Two record players, meanwhile, emitted muted carousel music, and crane marionettes appeared both naive and dark, placid and playful.

Luther Price's painted and assembled slides also invited close intimate viewing. Price creates his slides by adding dirt, paint, hair and ice-cream sprinkles, among other things, to found film reel, which he also manipulates, sometimes by burying it for extended periods. The effect is painterly, and the glowing saturated colours and tiny details, like miniature paintings, pulled you in to investigate. But no sooner had you examined one projection than the machine clicked on to the next.

The work of late painter and fisherman Forrest Bess (1911–1977) may have been the most spectacular in its understatedness. He's best known for the self-surgery he performed to become a quasi-hermaphrodite, a fact that was embraced (as Bess had wanted) in the exhibit of his work here, curated by sculptor Robert Gober. Alongside ten exquisite oil paintings were letters, articles and photographs from his life – including pre- and post-surgery Polaroids that he sent to friends – which empowered, rather than distracted from, the paintings. The primitive small-scale works, in addition to looking vaguely vulvar, resembled certain Indian Tantric paintings in their simplicity, intimacy and mystical bearing.

Vincent Fecteau's untitled sculptures of 2011 were one of the show's biggest surprises: looking from afar like chunky macho





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affairs, painted in unsubtle shades of kelly greens, peacocks and plums, the works softened on approach and their curves and matte flesh-coloured finish began to resemble skin – but also concrete, metal guard rails, crashed cars and curled-up puppies. It's unclear how so many associations were created by a contortion of gypsum cement and resin clay, but the effect was sublime, and slightly trippy.

The show was generously spaced – it had breathing room – and the airiness was conducive to reflection: on an uncrowded day the experience approached a walking meditation. Adorning the path was Bacher's *The celestial handbook*, 2011 – eighty-five framed pages from an old astronomy book, each a black-and-white image of some galactic phenomenon, with captions like 'Enormous cloud of glowing gas rises from the surface of the sun like a towering fountain of flame'. The individual pieces were not important, but they appeared in unexpected places – a dark passageway between exhibits, on a wall behind an installation, in the stairwell – like small, familiar birds, to accompany visitors.

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Whitney Biennial 2012, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1 March – 27 May 2012.

opposite, clockwise from top left

Gisèle Vienne with Dennis Cooper, Stephen O'Malley and Peter Rehberg, *LAST SPRING: A Prequel*, 2011, mixed-media installation with sound, dimensions variable, collection of Gisèle Vienne and DACM, courtesy Gisèle Vienne and DACM, © Gisèle Vienne; Tom Thayer, installation view, Whitney Biennial 2012, photograph Sheldon C. Collins; Sam Lewitt, *Untitled (material for Fluid Employment)*, 2012, digital photograph, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist and Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, © Sam Lewitt; Dawn Kasper, *This could be something if I let it*, 2012, site-specific performance installation, Whitney Biennial 2012, photograph Sheldon C. Collins.

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Wu Tsang, *WILDNESS*, 2012

Production still from high-definition video, colour, sound
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