

The New Criterion

Art

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Gallery chronicle

by [James Panero](#)

On "The 2008 Biennial Exhibition" at the Whitney Museum, "Moon Birds" at Knoedler & Company, and "Seven Deadly Sins & Recent Works by Jamie Wyeth" at Adelson Galleries.

What is it that draws us back to the Whitney Biennial every other year? This thought crossed my mind as I jumped down the staircase of Marcel Breuer's Legoland museum on Madison Avenue, hooked a left in the lobby, and made for the exit. I was going for my personal best for racing through this exhibition of "challenging" new American art.

Here was the scene inside Biennial 2008, this year under the direction of the Whitney curators Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin:^[1] A young artist by the name of Amanda Ross-Ho has constructed a giant blue kitty-litter box; Ruben Ochoa has created a sculpture of "eight wooden pallets, bonding cement, wire mesh, burlap, and rebar"; Fritz Haeg offers up a work called *Edible Estates* that is meant to be "an attack on the cherished institution of the American lawn."

On the ground floor, there is an installation of desk chairs, work tables, karaoke discs, and packing material made out of dried peas, styrofoam beads, and red salmon eggs by the late artist Jason Rhodes. This work continues a series of exhibitions known as, we are informed, the "Black Pussy" project (all of them featuring "neon 'pussy word' signs, as part of the artist's ongoing creation of a cross-cultural compendium of synonyms for female genitalia.")

I came upon a group of women standing in one room contemplating some white attenuated objects, identified as *Untitled* by the Los Angeles-based artist Charles Long, that vaguely resembled the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti. The quiet hush of confusion was broken as one lady proclaimed, "That's supposed to be bird droppings!"

Indeed. As the Biennial catalogue informs us: Charles Long "has fashioned tall, slender forms from ... flotsam—plaster and trash, cigarette packets and butts, feathers, scraps of plastic, and foil wrappers—to emulate accumulations of bird droppings."

The emulation of bird droppings—or the reproduction of a catbox and neon "pussy word" signs—is certainly not the highest artistic calling. Nor should it be a reason to visit a museum at all. The Whitney agrees with you. Even the Biennial itself, now in its seventy-fourth iteration, has grown tired of the vestigial avant-garde psychodramas, designed to *épater le bourgeois*, that might have once informed this curious show. And the museum public, of course, now knows crap when it sees it.

Far from a belief in any kind of authentic artistic experience, what drives the Biennial these days is the simple satisfaction of ritual. The thing that compels New Yorkers to make the pilgrimage to this upside-down ziggurat, designed to interrupt the ordered turn-of-the-century architecture of

Manhattan's elite Upper East Side, must be merely the memory that they did it two years before.

The Biennials all follow the same formula. The show assembles a hundred or so artists, most of whom you will never hear from again. Just look back at the Biennials of ten or twenty years ago and ask how many of the names are still mentioned today. The answer is very few. The artists here matter not because of the quality of their work but because they have been plucked from obscurity by the beneficent Whitney Museum, a process of temporary canonization designed to energize the curators and massage the philanthropic glands of the trustees. In fact, just the other week, Leonard A. Lauder announced a record-breaking \$131-million gift to the Whitney's endowment.

There are also the impenetrable rhetoric and political grandstanding that accompany each show. This iteration of the Biennial is no different. Here the artist Rodney McMillian is described as "reflecting his diverse interest in the boundaries demarcating class, economic status, culture, and their relationship to the human body." Some version of this boilerplate must be printed on the business card of every Whitney artist.

Two years ago, the over-arching goal of the 2006 Biennial was "wrongness." I'll leave it to the curators to explain that one:

The opposite of "right" is not "left," but "wrong." ... To be successful, an exhibition of the zeitgeist should be wrong. Wrong is, therefore, ultimately right, completing a loop of communicative thinking that unfolds across history and time like an endless Möbius strip.

This explanation does not elucidate so much as insulate a show from criticism, which is again a recurring component of Biennials—the "I'm rubber and you're glue" defense. If you set out to be "wrong," for example, is there a right or wrong way to do it? And is getting it right better or worse than getting it wrong? The same systems of logic circulate through this year's show, although the operative word has now gone from "wrongness" to "failure." Whether this is an improvement I will leave you to decide. Here is how the curators explain Biennial 2008:

The very idea of failure is in many ways antithetical to American culture, with its underlying tenets of Manifest Destiny, westward expansion, and unerring technological and economic progress. Acknowledgment of failure—even in the face of its most blatant manifestations—is almost taboo. ... And yet, perhaps in a kind of return of the repressed, the theme haunts much contemporary artwork in both subtle and more overt ways.

This translates at Biennial 2008 into a ponderously, programmatically dull show. I expect it will age even worse than its predecessors. Overthought, yet underwhelming, the exhibition feels not so much intimidating as intimidated—by the shadow of the "Grand Tour" of international art events that occurred last year in Venice, Basel, Kassel, and Muenster, and by the run-up of contemporary art prices, where it is the art fairs and auctions, not the museum world, that holds center stage.

The curators here have responded by opting out, with a selection of young artists barely able to get out of bed. Biennial 2008 is certainly the most perfunctory iteration of this ritual show to date—only this time consciously so. "The concept of 'failure' emerges as a key motif in a range of works," we are informed by the catalogue. "Artists are working (in diverse modes) that point to constriction, sustainability, nonmonumentality, antispectacle, and ephemerality."

Biennial 2008 is an introverted survey of work obsessed with less. The perspective of the artists strays little from home, content to reference the "tarnished glamour of the modernist project" in work that re-imagines Minimalist sculpture as the two-by-four-frames found in drywall. I believe that Javier Téllez's video *Letter on the Blind, For the Use of Those Who See*, a beautifully filmed

encounter between an elephant and a blind person, is the only work here that transcends the overdone postmodern formula. (Even Jedediah Ceasar's elegant marble-like blocks are the products of trash encased in resin.)

So you might say that a kitty-litter box is an appropriate image for Biennial 2008, a show that essentially scratches and claws at the stuffing of modernism—like the 1960s Italian movement Arte Povera, just this time without the art. As Rebecca Solnit, one of the contributors to the Biennial catalogue, observes:

The young: I often admire their lovely diffidence, the modesty that manifests as a refusal to tell other people what to do, a careful avoidance of all soapboxes and pulpits. Or I admire it up to a point, perhaps defined as a pinnacle of moral refinement beyond which lies a slippery slope. Small is beautiful, but too willfully small can become ineffectual, evasive, or trivial.

What's wrong with thinking big? We'll have to wait until Biennial 2010 to find out.

From cats to birds, two of the more interesting gallery shows this month deal with our feathered friends. Knoedler & Company is showing a series of paintings called "Moon Birds" by the young artist Ann Craven, who has worked as a studio assistant with Alex Katz, Joel Shapiro, and Ellen Phelan. [2] The "Moon" paintings of the show are small, moody, often wonderful observations of the night sky made over the last several years. The work calls to mind the "skying" observations made by Constable from Hampstead Heath. The artist John Smith writes in his catalogue essay for the Knoedler show, "I sometimes think she overdid it a little with the moons." True, the repetition of dozens of identical small canvases lined end-to-end can feel like serialism. But these restrained results are far superior to Craven's mural-like canvases of songbirds, also in the show. "A big painting of a bird *is* silly," observes the essay writer. Indeed, these garish images deserve to appear on the side of a Winnebago, not on the walls of one of New York's most esteemed galleries.

It might be said that each generation gets the Wyeth it deserves. The patriarch N. C. Wyeth (1882–1945) made haunting book illustrations for *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*. Andrew Wyeth (born 1917), his son, found a place for theatrical realism in the American landscape tradition. For the last forty years, Jamie Wyeth (born 1946), Andrew's son, has attempted to carve out a place for his own paintings, which often flirt with allegory. Jamie certainly has his choice of influences. In addition to his own family, he is a member of the Warhol circle, having been one of only two outside painters to work in the Factory (the other was Jean-Michel Basquiat).

In his latest series of paintings, on view at Adelson, Jamie mainly looks back to what I consider to be his best influence—his grandfather N. C. [3] Jamie Wyeth's wild paintings of flapping gulls are unapologetically illustration-like, and spell out each "sin" on the frames in letter-press typeface. *Gluttony*, for example, shows a gull choking on a herring. The same unabashed embrace of literary narrative informs the painting *Smashing Pumpkins, Monhegan* (2007) where we can see both the airborne pumpkins and the tiny figures tossing them from a bluff. The show concludes with *Inferno, Monhegan* (2006), a massive canvas of a shirtless boy stoking a smoking furnace of trash on a beach of screeching gulls. The immediate scene is powerfully staged, but we are left to wonder about the back story and what will happen next. We come upon these paintings as we would the torn-out pages of some long-lost storybook, and it is a joy to construct—or is it recall?—the stories surrounding them.

Notes

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1. "The 2008 Biennial Exhibition" opened at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on March 6 and remains on view through June 1, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. "Moon Birds" opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on March 13 and remains on view through April 26, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. "Seven Deadly Sins & Recent Works by Jamie Wyeth" opened at Adelson Galleries, New York, on March 14 and remains on view through April 18, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)

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