## Art

## Reviews

## 2010 Whitney Biennial

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Whitney Museum of American Art, through May 30 (see Museums)

The Whitney finally figures out how to put on a Biennial.
By **Howard Halle** 

Over the years, the Whitney Biennial has been described variously as "the Oscars of the art world" and "the show everybody loves to hate." But neither description seems to fit anymore, given the diminishing returns in the past decade by successive iterations of this biannual showcase of contemporary art. Perhaps "Golden Globes of the art world," or "the show everyone pays lip service to but nobody quite knows why," would be more suitable, though in a perfect world, the Biennial would be retired. That'll never happen, of course, because the Whitney has invested too much of its brand into the show, despite the fact that the reasons for mounting it seem pretty much exhausted by now, and the museum itself has seen its fortunes slide.

But guess what? The Whitney appears to have finally learned how to mount a decent Biennial, though ironically, the 2010 editionorganized by guest curator Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari. the museum's senior curatorial assistant-doesn't suck precisely because it doesn't feel or look like your avesage Biennial. Instead of the usual blustery, blockbustery attempt at bottling a zeitgeist that's presumably different from two years before, this show offers a master class on curating. It balances formal with content-based works, while hinting at an overarching theme on which it hangs its hat. It doesn't favor youth over experience; instead, it puts older artists on equal footing with those who are younger than Jesus. It's the smallest such roundup since 1989, a recessionary concession no doubt, but one that actually leaves room for the work (including-gasp!-painting) to breathe. There are misses here





along with hits, and much of the work is too reliant on backstories provided by explanatory wall labels. But while the results may not be entirely satisfactory, let alone revolutionary, they won't leave you feeling overwhelmed or cheated.

No disrespect to Carrion-Murayari, but the credit for this must largely go to Bonami, an old art-world pro best known for helming the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, and for his '90s stint as U.S. editor of Flash Art International. This is hardly the first time that the Biennial has employed a European curator or featured European artists, but Bonami's background—born in Florence, Italy.

in 1955, he became a U.S. citizen in 2001allows, perhaps, for a more nuanced perspective than previous jaunts outside the box. The show is suffused with a sardonic sensibility, as if Bonami were using the decline of the Whitney dedicated, after all, to American art-as a metaphor for the decline of America itself. More

poignantly, the exhibition also touches upon the perils and opportunities of personal transformation associated with this country. In that sense, it's almost as if Bonami were channeling some aspects of his own coming to America, free-associating remembrances that are both short-term and long, institutional and historical, personal and shared.

This reading is clearer, admittedly, if you start on the top floor, where you're greeted by Piotr Uklanski's burlap whatchamacallit of a wall piece hanging opposite the elevator. Fronted by a shiny bright-red tondo covered with Brobdingnagian squiggles that

this installation (actually two works) is an homage to Expressionist, avantgarde theatrical set design from 1950s Poland, the artist's home country. It's something of a WTF moment, until you consider that Uklanski first made his bones by immortalizing the deracinated detritus of American pop culture, notably the disco floor from Saturday Night Fever and movie Nazis. In the gallery to the right, a curious series of photo-diptychs by Lorraine O'Grady, pairing images of Baudelaire and Michael Jackson. are offset by the Bruce High Quality Foundation's video-cum-ambulance installation. Titled We Like America

seem squeezed from a giant paint tube,

and America Likes Us. the latter is a takeoff on Joseph Beuvs's 1974 performance, ILike America and America Likes Me, in which the artist-shaman celebrated his very first visit to the United States. He didn't get to see much: His trip was limited to an ambulance ride to and from JFK Airport and the René Block Gallery, where he spent three days communing with a live



coyote. That vehicle was the same make and model as the one here, a Cadillac Miller-Meteor—also made famous in the film Ghostbusters. BHQF's video, projected onto the inside of the windshield, thus features a montage of documentary footage of Beuys's piece, glimpses from Ivan Reitman's comedy classic, and more or less generic scenes of our great nation accompanied by a female narrator lugubriously intoning phrases like "We drunk-dial our memories of America."

Again, nothing earth-shattering; to paraphrase Bob Dylan, you don't need a voiceover to know which way the wind blows. But the piece works in this context, especially as you move from its mental cacophony into the next gallery, which is dominated by serene abstractions, courtesy of painters Sarah Crowner, Suzan Frecon and Tauba Auerbach. That kind of pingponging between sense and structure happens throughout the show. Sometimes the effect is a delayed one: On one floor you run into Stephanie Sinclair's heartbreaking photos of Afghan women who have immolated themselves to escape oppressive marriages; on another floor, you see Nina Berman's horrifying images of a former Marine burned beyond recognition by a suicide bomber in Iraq. This Biennial isn't afraid to give you the rough stuff, but it's smart enough not to rub your nose in it.