



ART

**Change We Can Believe In**  
The Whitney Biennial  
is thoughtful, humanly scaled, and  
blessedly low on hype.

BY JERRY SALTZ

**T**HE COVER of the 2010 Whitney Biennial catalogue displays a picture of Barack Obama as a Dapper Dan cowboy. Inside, guest curator Francesco Bonami and co-curator Gary Carrion-Murayari call the president “the coolest artist of all” and say their show is about “innovative forms,” “new relationships,” and “personal modernism.” After two biennials devoted to dealing with “failure” and “darkness,” this catalogue speaks of “renewal” and “optimism.” Yes, it’s the Obama Biennial: alternately moving and frustrating, challenging and disappointing—and a big improvement on what came before.

It is also historic: For the first time, there are more women included than men. How thrilling and important this is shouldn’t be overlooked or treated cynically, because this biennial isn’t about women’s art, feminism, or affirmative action. Nor is it about paint-

ing, although there’s more nonphotographic, handmade two-dimensional work here than I recall seeing for decades. Instead, it provides glimpses of American strangeness, of pluralistic grassroots experimentalism. It is rich in surprises and new names, doesn’t follow too many trends, and deals with the self and aesthetics in fresh ways.

It’s also—praise God—small. The Biennial has finally been pared down to a manageable 55 artists. It is not visually assaultive; it gives all the art room to breathe, whereupon you realize how bombastic most such shows are. The 2010 Biennial is anti-blockbuster. It avoids razzmatazz, star power, and high production. It’s more like a medium-size group show than a big museum smorgasbord. It isn’t New York-centric, youth obsessed, or drawn mainly from a coterie of high-powered New York galleries. It is *quiet*. The art world has clamored for these things for years, and people should cheer this show.

They probably won’t, though. By now it’s clear that there is no such thing as a “good biennial,” that the form itself is bound to

2010 WHITNEY BIENNIAL  
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART  
THROUGH MAY 30

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generate a mixed bag. This time, the clunkers are the bland placeholders. Too much of the two-dimensional work either recaps ideas about craft and abstraction in generic ways or touches on issues of identity without saying anything. But the unexpected curatorial choices outnumber the banal. I love that, instead of encountering a huge installation in front of the giant fourth-floor window, we see Richard Aldrich's tiny abstract voodoo doll. Huma Bhabha's Giacometti-esque sculpture of decaying gods stands almost directly below Sharon Hayes's videos of someone trying to listen very hard: Does she hear them? Or that the self-reflective, formalistic films and photos of Babette Mangolte are given an entire room, and thus form one of the beating hearts of this show. This veteran artist's obsessive examinations of what it means to make and display art, her investigations into seemingly outmoded ideas of modernism and presentation, and the ways these things make visible the self are touchstones for much of the work in this show.

A lot of the art shows people acting out,

1. Huma Bhabha's *My Skull Is Too Small* (2009).
2. Charles Ray's *Untitled* (2009).
3. Stephanie Sinclair's *Self-Immolation in Afghanistan: A Cry for Help* (2005).
4. From Babette Mangolte's *Composite for How to Look... (1978/2009)*.
5. A still from Ari Marcopoulos's *Detroit* (2009).
6. Jessica Jackson Hutchins's *Couch for a Long Time* (2009).

dressing up, playing around, doing private dances, or making idols to otherness. It's like seeing the ghosts of seventies dance and performance move to new rhythms. The ways in which some of this art melds the public and private selves produces sparks. In one of the best pieces here, Jessica Jackson Hutchins collages newspaper clippings about President Obama onto a lumpy couch that is also a base for two marvelously gnarly ceramic vessels. All those images together with the cracked pottery evoke intense pressure—the pressure that we, he, art, and America are under. It's a homemade altar, and it's displayed among Nina Berman's photos of 'Iy Ziegel, an Illinois Marine sergeant severely disfigured in a suicide attack in Iraq. Expectations, shattered dreams,

hope, and loss rub up against one another.

Just off the elevator on the fourth floor comes another energy surge: Piotr Uklanski's spectacular gigantic semicircular fabric planet thing. You quickly grasp that this immense sculpture is a comment on feminism, craft, and science fiction, but its scale and skill tell you that it's also sincere and involved. He's making this out of love, not just intellect, and it's a tour de force. Similarly, in the next gallery Charles Ray's beautiful portraits of flowers send a message to artists everywhere: "We no longer have to only 'make it new.' That is killing us. We can simply make art and explore inner recesses, secret lives, unimagined realms, or any other dimension."

A lot of people will want more from this show than they'll get, but Bonami is on the right track. The 2010 Biennial wants to change what behemoth shows like this can be. After seeing Ari Marcopoulos's intense video in which two young kids make electronic music in their tiny Detroit bedroom, I left the museum with a giant burst of happiness for the infinite creativity of America. ■