

NO OFFENSE

The Whitney Biennial.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

For me, the most arresting work in the Whitney Biennial is, not for the first time, by Charles Ray. The California creator of aesthetically potent oddities rattled the 1989 Biennial with a disk-shaped section of wall that inconspicuously rotated at fantastic speed; the 1993 Biennial, with a veristic sculpture of a naked family of four, all the size of its young

nilly from solid centers, but meticulously crafted, with apparent overlaps that, in unforgiving ink, are exactly managed. Their ostensible spontaneity is a calculated illusion, as is an impression of earnest innocence that suggests outsider art. Seemingly numb to both nature and artifice, they might be by someone who had heard of flowers but never seen one,

choices to the election of Barack Obama. Their catalogue essay adduces an abatement of social discontent under the new Administration: "The presence of a reassuring and inspiring political figure allowed people to focus on their intimate concerns again. Traditional forms of protest and resistance were no longer needed." People whose intimate concerns were already of intimate concern to them, or who hadn't deemed themselves political resisters, are not addressed. To Bonami and Carrion-Murayari, "it feels as though artists all across the United States are reaffirming the importance of the individual gesture in order to produce a collective change." That wouldn't seem to rule out much except foursquare "protest art," which, honestly, wasn't all that



Piotr Uklanski's "Untitled (Red Dwarf)" and "Untitled (The Year We Make Contact)," both from 2010, and, above, Charles Ray's "Untitled" (2006). Photographs by Gus Powell.

son, and a life-size plastic toy fire engine, parked out on Madison Avenue; and the 1995 edition, with a wooden, carved and painted, full-length self-portrait in a clear-glass bottle. (The self-portrait reappears this year in a chewy selection, on the museum's fifth floor, of artists who have starred in Biennials—or, for an interim spell of thirty-five years, *Annals*—since the exhibition's inception, in 1932. There we learn that Edward Hopper figured in twenty-six shows, Willem de Kooning in sixteen, and Andy Warhol, amazing to say, in only two.) This time, Ray's outstanding impertinence is a roomful of fifteen large drawings of flowers in multicolored inks. The blooms are schematic exaggerations, with wire-thin stems and snaking petals. Singly or in gardenlike profusion, they are gawkily styled, with the petals exploding willy-

and had heard of art but hadn't encountered it, either. As usual with Ray, a gulf yawns between speculating about what he thinks he's doing and staring, blankly, at what he has done. The experience induces a buzzing, somehow salutary state of mind.

Ray is a gadfly conscience of a culture given to the myth that artists are free to do whatever they like. The show surrounding his dramatically uncalled-for flowers argues to the contrary. Artists ambitious to be noticed who don't reflect the manias of the moment seldom qualify for exhibitions like the Biennial. That's no scandal. Scanning the *Zeitgeist*, though it tends to foster an indulgence of timely mediocrities, is a public service of such shows. The present Biennial's curators, Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari, relate their

rife in the George W. Bush years, an era that will be bookmarked in art history by a prevalence of pricey glitz. (Socially critical art last peaked during the Clintonian nineties, heralded by the identity-political Biennial of 1993, at which the artist Daniel Joseph Martinez dispensed buttons that read, "I can't imagine ever wanting to be white.") As it turns out, the valuing of "individual gesture" imposes a criterion of its own: moody bemusement, more or less. Tentativeness is all the rage.

Amid the inevitable video installations, there is more painting at the Biennial than there has been for many years. Much of it is abstract and restrained to a fault, tending to monochrome and textural effects, shy of being unduly seductive. Tiny pictures of rural buildings, done with a minimum of strikingly deft

strokes by Maureen Gallace, stand out pleasantly in the context. So do Expressionistic whimsies by George Condo, Verne Dawson, Robert Williams, and Aurel Schmidt, in my favorite of the show's rooms, which also features a wonderful sculpture by Huma Bhabha: vestigial mask faces in gouged and blackened Styrofoam and clay-slathered wire mesh atop a charcoal-graffitied plywood box, with metal and wooden detritus and scattered dirt. Schmidt's large drawing—in materials including, it says, beer and blood—depicts a Minotaur composed mostly of cigarette butts and consumer goods, including condoms. The strident unwholesomeness proves oddly refreshing in the show's ambience of fretful compunctions. It extends to a vast wall piece in raw jute and hemp, ripped and sewn and clotted with clay and paint, by Piotr Ukiński: lobby art for a condemned office tower, perhaps. Less audacious, beyond a first impression, is a work by the much publicized artists' group the Bruce High Quality Foundation, titled "We Like America and America Likes Us," which involves a nineteen-sixties Cadillac hearse crudely painted white and given a flashing roof light, to evoke an ambulance. A filmic montage of national clichés (the space program, Jackson Pollock, Madonna) is rear-projected onto the cracked windshield. A silky female voice recites an interminable prose poem that speaks of America in terms befitting dysfunctional families and romantic imbroglios. The cumulative effect is punishingly fey. If the Bruces signal Bonami and Carrion-Murayari's incipient "collective change," we can plan on going nowhere.

The atmosphere of irresolution favors some respected but little celebrated veterans. A big space is given to a sculpture by Robert Grosvenor, a member of the minimalist generation whose relatively complex, allusive work has never snuggled into any stylistic category. A standing grille of aluminum rods bent into incomplete circles faces a flat-topped arch of red-flocked fiberglass. The shapes of the rods are echoed by a regular pattern of lumps in the arch. Sort of theatrical and altogether abstruse, the piece seems an apt symbol for a time of befuddled striving in art and, for that matter, most other things. Likewise rescued from semi-obscurity is the studio-setup photographer James Case-

bere, a sometime associate of the late-nineteen-seventies Pictures school, whose more renowned alumni include Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince. Large color photographs render tabletop models of suburban subdivisions—in Dutchess County, New York, we are assured—from low-flying-airplane points of view. Atmospheric, pretty pastel tones bespeak an impulse toward verisimilitude that deliberately falls short of deception. The houses are cardboard, plainly. Casebere's neighborhood-scapes, like successful paintings, are interesting to the precise extent of our interest in them. They entertain and reward reveries. What they're about is anyone's call. I like them.

Video and film works in the show are notably boring, on the whole—dancers rehearsing voguing moves, a car being equipped with sculptural appendages, and other ho-hum goings on. But, mercifully, most are either short or obvious enough not to use up your day with sitting them out. The most prepossessing is an energetic performance by Marianne Vitale, who, from a wall-hung monitor, harangues "patrons" with colorfully worded, dominatrix-style insults and commands. The provoked notion of contemporary art as an arena of sadomasochism is just cogent enough to chill, a trifle. But gradually you may pick up on how much fun Vitale is having being a mean girl—multiple quick cuts hint at omitted moments when she cracked herself up. Live performances by several artists, which I have not seen, are scheduled for the run of the show—appropriately, given a recent efflorescence of inventive theatrics in small theatres, dance spaces, clubs, and, sometimes, galleries.

Apart from a few works, such as those by Bhabha and Ukiński, and a couple of mutedly horrific sets of photographs—by Stephanie Sinclair, picturing Afghan women who had set themselves afire, and by Nina Berman, of a disfigured Iraq War veteran—this Biennial seems intent not only on not offending aesthetic appetite but practically on sedating it. The tone may be purposeful, like someone whispering to find out if you are paying attention. That would befit the curators' thesis of a strategic withdrawal among today's artists. Maybe we will have deserved more to look at when 2012 rolls around, and Charles Ray won't be tasked, again, with jolting us awake. ♦