

Whittling Down The Whitney

By Blake Gopnik

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Those three lines were written before I even set out for New York, where the 2004 edition of the nation's most important roundup of contemporary art has just launched.

My triple affirmation was partly meant to fight against a long tradition of panning the show. What could be duller than taking potshots at a famous exhibition that is already certain to take its share of hits?

But it also had deeper roots: If art lovers are almost always disappointed by the Whitney's survey, maybe the problem lies in our expectations rather than in the show itself. Though it features more than 300 works chosen from across the nation in something like nine months, we still somehow imagine that the biennial should be a tight, coherent show of excellent art. In fact, it can never be more than a grab bag of whatever work happens to have been made since the previous edition of the show.

Great exhibitions come about when curators identify important art that speaks to them, and then spend many years shaping it into a show that will speak to us. The Whitney Biennial comes about because another two years have gone by and someone's got to pull something together, fast.

Whitney curators Chrissie Iles, Debra Singer and Shamim Momin did a fine, responsible job in pulling together this biennial. They crisscrossed the country, conducting hundreds of studio and gallery visits, then picked out 108 artists and collectives that seemed to represent the most notable new tendencies in art. Of their picks, 11 or so struck me at once as worth a longer look. Ten percent. Not a great ratio, maybe, but not too bad, all things considered. These curators can hardly be blamed if their show comes at a moment in the history of art that just about everyone concedes to be unusually sluggish.

I dare any critic, curator or collector to name 108 contemporary artists making work that seems to point in new directions. For that matter, I dare them to think back and name 108 artists they could have gone to bat for in 1510 or 1910, two of the most fertile moments in the whole history of Western art.

There is plenty of dross at the 2004 Whitney Biennial, but it's the same dross that any thorough survey of the art world would reveal. Current trends correctly noted by the curators, and represented in this show, include

sleepy abstraction, retro psychedelia and neoconservative figurative painting.

I guess I might have preferred a much smaller biennial that was less representative but more impressive. But then that's just what any outsize gathering of art essentially becomes, as viewers wander through it choosing to notice some works and to pass others by. Simply because of its unmanageable scale -- its sprawl includes paintings, drawings, sculptures, installations, soundworks, performances, Web sites, films and videos -- in practice this exhibition will become a different show for every visitor.

Inside this section is my own, private, 11-artist mini-biennial, culled from a preview of the museum's galleries.

Eve Sussman's video projection "89 Seconds at Alcazar" turns Velazquez's slice of 17th-century life into a moment of complex narrative. Taylor Davis's "Pallet": Industrial materials form an abstract world of spare simplicity.