

Review/Art

A Whitney Biennial With a Social Conscience

By ROBERTA SMITH

The 1993 Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art begins on Madison Avenue in front of the building, where an enormous sculpture of a fire engine by the California artist Charles Ray is parked at the curb. Sleekly red, it is also hugely cute, because its skewed proportions and simplified details are those of a child's toy that has been blown up to adult real-life scale. Enjoy it. There's not a lot of eyes-on pleasure to be had inside, where the latest Biennial turns its back on the razzle-dazzle of the 1980's and faces the harsher realities of the 90's.

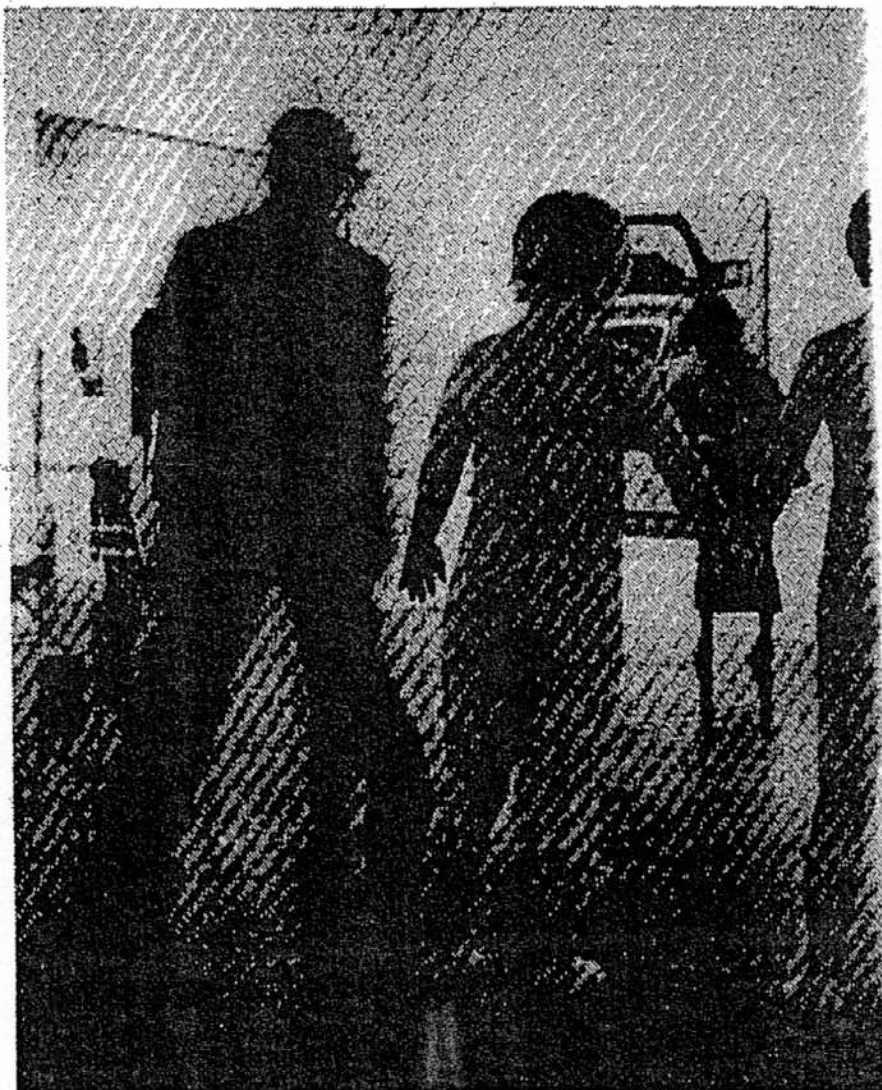
The first Biennial to be completely organized during the tenure of David A. Ross, the museum's director, the '93 version is a pious, often arid show that frequently substitutes didactic moralizing for genuine visual communication. It could easily be subtitled "The Importance of Being Earnest." It could also be called the Reading While Standing Up Biennial: the art is often heavy with text, even without the simplistic artists' statements featured on many labels and the reading room, where one can peruse the latest books of cultural and sociopolitical theory.

Nonetheless, this Biennial is a watershed.

In some ways it is actually a better show than usual, simply because it sticks its neck out. For one thing, this is the first Biennial to be selected mostly by one person and less by committee. Elizabeth Sussman, a curator who worked for Mr. Ross at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, seems to have had the final say about the show, although Lisa Phillips, John G. Hanhardt and Thelma Golden, other Whitney curators, also worked on it. Instead of a frequently docile presentation of market trends, like so many of its predecessors, this show takes a distinct position. It focuses on a range of art that is more or less political — or at least social — paying scant attention to anything else.

Installation art, sculpture and late-century Conceptualism claim the front lines here, with painting far to the rear. The artists represent a savvy mix of mainstream and marginal, and confrontation fills the air. After Mr. Ray's fire truck, the next thing you'll see, suspended above the Whitney's restaurant, is Pat Ward Williams's photomural of five stern black youths, scrawled with angry red graffiti saying "What you lookn at." With its

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Social commentary: Charles Ray's sculpture of a mutated nuclear family, "Family"

gender, sexuality, the AIDS crisis, imperialism and poverty, the work on view touches on many of the most pressing problems facing the country at the dawn of the Clinton Administration and tries to show how artists are grappling with them. The wall labels and texts are rife with fashionable buzzwords: identity, difference, otherness. Anita Hill, the Persian Gulf war and the violence that followed the Rodney G. King verdict flash before the eye, usually on video. In fact, the exhibition makes a video artist of George Holliday, the man who was using his camcorder for the first time and happened to videotape the Los Angeles police beating Mr. King, spontaneously creating a document, if not an artwork, that once more brought the issue of racism to every American living room.

The presence of Mr. Holliday's tape signals one of the show's basic flaws, which is that it is less about the art of our time than about the times themselves.

But in opting for a clear-cut theme, Mr. Ross and his curators get credit for breaking the biennial mold and demonstrating that this mainstay of the contemporary art scene can be radically changed, rather than simply adjusted year to year. Their decision will look even better if other esthetic approaches receive equal time in future Biennials.

The Ross Whitney also gets credit for mounting one of the most ethnically diverse, generously installed shows in Biennial history. Spacious to the point of luxury, this show spreads the work of only 82 artists (nearly half of whom work in film or videotape), throughout the five-story building so that several participants have entire galleries to themselves. More important and perhaps in keeping with the new administration, this is an inclu-

Installation art, sculpture and late-century Conceptualism.

sive Biennial that emphatically reflects the country's diversity by including unusually large numbers of nonwhite artists, artists whose work is openly gay, and women.

Among the first-timers are Jimmie Durham, whose sinister yet witty patchwork sculptures of things like bones, machine parts and weapon fragments comment on the basic incompatibility of the natural and the industrial; Pepón Osorio, a theater designer and installation artist whose ornate and gory installation of a Hispanic family's living room is also the scene of a crime of passion; Renée Green, whose bookish installation traces a process of cultural exchange and misconception, and Nancy Spero, whose combinations of feminist images and texts have exerted a quiet influence for two decades. One of the show's real discoveries is Sadie Benning, a 20-year-old video artist whose wonderfully offhand 20-minute tape, "It Wasn't Love," (shot primarily in the artist's bedroom) recasts a film noir road romance with lesbian lovers.

Also present among the Biennial newcomers are emerging artists already established downtown: Janine Antoni and Matthew Barney, who both push Body Art to new extremes; Suzanne McClelland, a maker of abstract paintings full of hidden words and letters; Sue Williams, whose sleazy cartoonish paintings skewer male domination; Jack Pierson, whose fuzzy color photographs meditate on different forms of sexuality and beauty, and Lorna Simpson, a photographer and installation artist whose contribution, titled "Hypothetical?," includes an expanse of horn mouthpieces set into a wall that is wonderful to look at it, even if its political intent remains unclear.

Finally, there is an unusually young batch of returnees from Biennials past: most notably the sculptors Robert Gober, Kiki Smith, Chris Burden and Mike Kelley; the photographers Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman, and Glenn Ligon, a painter who contributes a photo-text piece this time.

While the exhibition dwells at length on the problems that face fin de siècle America, it does not often demonstrate their conversion into convincing works of art. There are only a few instances where the political and visual join forces with real effectiveness, among them Ms. Williams's bitter paintings; Ms. Sherman's photographs of grotesque sex dolls; Alison Saar's metal relief, a silhouette of a brown male figure that seems to be both levitating and painfully nailed down, and above all, Lari Pittman's fiercely beautiful semi-abstract paintings, in which tight, almost Victorian patterns and images turn out to portray the AIDS crisis graphically.

Also effective is Mr. Ligon's "Notes on the Margins of 'The Black Book,'" a Roshomon-like Conceptual Art piece that juxtaposes the images of black nudes from Robert Mapplethorpe's "Black Book" with excerpts from different critics and politicians. The contrasting opinions and insights clarify the individuality of esthetic response while illuminating the pictures themselves.

Some pieces are obvious one-line harangues that sustain only a quick I-get-it look. Gary Simmons's row of gold-plated sneakers presented as if in a bodiless police lineup, has the depth of a store window display. (Mr.

been considered include Marlene McCarty, whose slyly decorative canvases mince no words about feminine sexuality; Kerry James Marshall, a Los Angeles artist whose buoyantly decorative paintings examine black history and experience, and Faith Ringgold, whose spirited quilt-paintings often portray the life of the black female artist with celebratory wit. Like Ms. Spero, Ms. Ringgold has been waiting in the wings too long.

As it stands, the six videotapes I viewed in the exhibition's central video galleries, including Jeanne C. Finley's wry "Involuntary Conversion" and Mark Rappaport's touching if fictional memoir, "Rock Hudson's Home Movies," suggested that this medium may be the most consistently impressive part of the show. This is because in video, as in film, the linguistic, political and formal come together naturally and sensuously, and pleasure is harder to avoid.

Clearly pleasure is not what the '93 Biennial had uppermost in mind. Committed, provocative and informative, it should not be missed, as its flaws and achievements will be debated for some time. But it too often loses sight of the fact that art is a form of visual communication that must exist for its own sake before it can further a cause. In the end, this ambitious show illuminates the pitfalls of politically inclined art far more than its triumphs.

eyes, drawn in smeared white paint on black, seem to buzz around a dark expanse, evoking nervous, furious, endlessly stereotyped black people.)

Sometimes the artist never really gets to the point: for example, the pretentiously complex, incoherent installation of Daniel J. Martinez, which assembles several video monitors, a cage made of cut-out words strewn with pages from a telephone book and much else. Far more succinct are the museum admission buttons that Mr. Martinez has designed for use during the exhibition, the best of which says, "I can't imagine ever wanting to be white."

In other instances, artists are outstripped by their own statements. Fred Wilson's wall label leads one to expect an intricate dissection of the museum's "imperialist reality," but his installation does little more than present a fusion of museum and museum shop: replicas of Egyptian sculpture draped with T-shirts and cheap jewelry. (Generally, almost no artist is helped by these ancillary statements of purpose; when they do not grossly exaggerate or simplify the artist's effort, they explain what should be self-evident in the work itself, but is not.)

And sometimes artists seem to be simply using the wrong format or medium. Allan Sekula's distinctive texts and color photographs, which ruminate on the political and ecological nature of international seaports, belong in a book, not on the wall. Ms. Green's abstruse installation, which combines books, wall texts, video and audiotape to examine a German critic's obsession with American rap music, actually seems like the raw material for an exceptional film. In its present state, it is deadeningly academic, but at heart it is a work about the way esthetic passion moves things, like rap or jazz, from one culture to another, creating misconceptions about their points of origin but also disseminating pleasure.

Not every last artwork in this show is overtly political. Peter Cain's paintings of mutated car bodies and Mr. Ray's mannequin sculpture, "Family Romance," a shockingly mutated nuclear family, engage in a subtle, highly visual form of social commentary (and their pairing in a second-floor gallery is one of the curators' brightest ideas). The opaque computer-derived works of Peter Campus and the artist team of Michel Joaquin Grey and Randolph Huff comment more on the relationship of art and science. But it's interesting that most of the less political work in the Biennial is made by white males. The unfortunate impression created is that to succeed, the art of minority artists and women must be closely tied to their personal situation, preferably to their sense of victimization.

In general, Ms. Sussman and her colleagues might have applied their theme a little more evenly and less predictably. Their show is so slanted toward sculpture and installation art, often seen as the premier political art media, that it neglects painting, which is plenty political itself these days. Other painters who might have