

guardian.co.uk

Whitney Biennial 2010: still flying the flag?

This may be the first year it features more female artists than men, but as America's snapshot through contemporary art hits 75, can it still hold its own?



Kriston Capps

guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 2 March 2010 17:10 GMT



Cars and stripes ... We Like America and America Likes Us (2010) by the Bruce High Quality Foundation. Photograph: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

The 2010 Whitney Biennial – defiantly and unassailably labelled "2010" – is slimmer in scope and size than its immediate predecessors. Call it an attempt to trim the sails of a programme that is perennially attacked for editorial overreach. This time around, the show lacks the prescriptive thrust of either the politically trenchant 2006 edition or its lo-fi, recession-minded 2008 incarnation. Instead, curators Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari have put together what Bonami described in his opening remarks as a "very American, subtle atmosphere".

If anything, though, this is something of a birthday party. With 2010, the whole museum has been given over to celebrating the 75th anniversary of the show: alongside Collecting Biennials, an installation of works from the permanent collection by artists who have previously appeared, all the way from Edward Hopper, Warhol and Rothko to Kenneth Anger, Eva Hesse and Julian Schnabel. The Whitney is pre-eminent in its ability to take the temperature of American art, particularly if it's being made in LA or New York. But the world has changed: it now competes for relevance with the art fairs that happen nearly every month around the world.

And even a biennial that snubs categorisation cannot escape context. 2010 forms a

milestone for the Whitney as well as the art world: for the first time in its history, more women than men have found their way into the biennial. This is a long-overdue correction, though Bonami has pooh-poohed the suggestion that this was his goal.

Even so, sometimes the effect is ghettoising. The show inadvisedly lumps formalist abstractions by [Tauba Auerbach](#), [Sarah Crowner](#) and [Suzan Frecon](#) into one room. Auerbach folds her canvases before flattening and spray-painting them, merging two and three dimensions in industrial-looking, monochromatic paintings. Crowner's chevrons in white and black are similarly clinical, while Frecon's abstractions reference Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko but without the heroism. By zeroing in on the similarities between the works – scale, severity, austerity and square format – the curators miss an opportunity to put these artists into dialogue with any other mode of American art. It's as if one conversation is being held by three artists who are rhyming, not debating.

Other work provides a reminder – as if any were needed – that the US is still very much at war, and that women are very much involved. Photojournalists [Nina Berman](#) and [Stephanie Sinclair](#) present stark and surreal images depicting casualties related to America's wars in the Middle East. Harrowing photos from Sinclair's 2005 series *Self-Immolation in Afghanistan: A Cry for Help* reveal women in Afghanistan receiving treatment at a rudimentary hospital after attempting to burn themselves alive – often attempting to escape abusive husbands. One 15-year-old girl is pictured in a pink bow, her skin blistered away from her raw, naked torso and arms. Berman's 2006 photographs, from a series titled *Marine Wedding*, examine war from the other side, following a soldier who underwent 19 months of reconstructive surgery after being injured by a suicide bomber in Iraq, and his then-fiancee Renee Kline at home from the war. Both series have been widely celebrated and published; however strong the images are, though, they seem too specific, too much on one note, in this show.

The small still lifes of [Lesley Vance](#) suggest the brushstrokes and rich colour of the 17th-century Spanish tradition while refusing to imitate them. Over rich black backdrops, Vance paints wet, heavy strokes of red, ochre and sienna. She assembles and lights models for her paintings but operates at a remove, painting from a photograph. Fathoms of tradition are reflected in the painted surface.

[Maureen Gallace](#)'s paintings appear modest, by contrast, but are yet more audacious. Gallace paints representative landscapes and homes from her native New England. Bright afternoon-lit homes under cloudless skies are bathed by a near-radioactive glow that echoes Edward Hopper; yet in Gallace's wet brushstroke and blocky geometric houses, an unexpected and wholly welcome character emerges, cousin to Philip Guston or, more recently, [Dana Schutz](#) – American painters whose work embraces representation but draws from abstract traditions.

Altogether more pointed – at least in theory – is *We Like America and America Likes Us* (2010) by the [Bruce High Quality Foundation](#), which name-checks Joseph Beuys's famous installation *I Like America and America Likes Me*, in which the artist shared a Manhattan gallery with a coyote for three days in 1974. Unfortunately, however, the BHQF's piece is an over-literal stab at summarising America's situation at the cusp of the twenty-teens. On the windshield of a vast white ambulance/hearse parked in the gallery (think the car from *Ghostbusters*), the group has projected a video montage

featuring clips from everything from Hitchcock classics to Youtube memes. The theme tune to America's Funniest Home Videos sounds off alongside Thelonius Monk and John Coltrane's glorious [Ruby My Dear](#) and other classic American songs. Over this soundtrack, a narrator reads a tragic love letter that names America as its subject. ("When did we become a thing to hold on to rather than a thing to hold?" the narrator laments.) It clumsily and unsubtly reiterates the point that, for better or worse, America is to be found in Americana.

Other conceptual-oriented artists fare equally badly. [Michael Asher's](#) untitled proposal asks that for one week the Whitney Biennial stay open 24 hours a day, an intervention that the museum is half-accommodating for three days in March. (Human resource limitations prevent the full week, a placard hidden near a stairwell explains.) Though it fits the birthday atmosphere, as a piece it feels tired; a demonstration that some conceptual art, at least, hasn't moved beyond 1960s modes of institutional critique.

One artist, [Kate Gilmore](#), seems to take this sense of entrapment even more literally, but makes it count. For *Standing Here* (2010) the artist walled herself into a standing-room only space, square and nearly ceiling-high, during the biennial's installation. A video shot overhead captures her, wearing heels and a red polkadot dress, as she bashes and smashes her way through the walls of her enclosure. It is not immediately apparent whether she is trying to escape or merely create a form of performance [sculpture](#). The demolished remains of the enclosure, an artefact of the performance that still stands there alongside the video projection, suggests it's the latter.

It has other resonances, too. In a show where more women than ever before appear, it's hard not to see Gilmore's work as an attempt to break free from the past, as well as the struggle involved in making new art. It's one of the few works in the biennial to say that America is not standing still.

Ads by Google

New York Gallery Openings

NY's comprehensive calendar of art openings, events and exhibits
NY.ARTslant.com

Study Texture Art

Study Texture Art at an Art Institutes School. Learn More Now!
www.artinstitutes.edu

Online Art Study Programs

Enroll In Savannah College of Art and Design. Earn a Degree Online!
www.SCAD.edu/elearning

Comments in chronological order (Total 0 comments)

Post a comment

 Staff

 Contributor

There are no comments yet for this article.

In order to post a comment you need to be registered and signed in.

[Register](#) | [Sign in](#)

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2010