

Letter From Long Island

Biennial: Caring And Compassionate

Dear Aunt Susannah,

I have been to the Whitney Biennial, but I have to confess that I didn't see everything in it. I mean I am sure the film and video are great, but cousin George calculated that it would take eight hours and thirteen minutes, spread out over three days, just to see the video alone, and I didn't have the time.

However, I did see all the painting and sculpture, and it was thrilling. More than half of the artists in the Biennial are new to the Whitney, and even the old masters like Donald Judd, Jasper Johns and David Salle are doing something new, like breaking through the picture plane or incorporating photographs in their paintings or painting minimal sculpture in bright, shiny colors.

George, I'm afraid, doesn't take kindly to newness. In fact, when it comes to the Whitney Biennial, which is all about newness, the only thing George and I agree on is this: If tax-exempt dollars are going to be spent on it, it better be good. I mean in a democracy like ours, the purpose of art is to elevate the people and put them in touch with the higher things in life, isn't it? And if an art museum can't do better than the mass media, somebody should investigate.

George thinks there is entirely too much newness in this year's Biennial. "Would you want to throw away Mozart just because he didn't change his style every two or three years?" he says, and of course I would not. But things didn't move as fast in Mozart's time as they do today. I mean first we had railroads, and then we had automobiles and airplanes, and now we have space shuttles and rockets that go to the moon, not to mention video games and personal computers. Nowadays an artist has to change every two or three years just to stay put. Here are George's notes on the changes this year:

"Minimal sculpture is out, except for Donald Judd, and figurative sculpture is in, provided it is indecent. Day-Glo colors are in even in minimal sculpture. Figurative drawing is in, provided it looks like the work of a comic strip artist or an illustrator with the shakes, but Julian Schnabel and Neo-Expressionism are out, except for Susan Rothenberg. Decorative painting is in, especially if



BARBARA KRUGER, Untitled, 1985, Black and white photograph, lenticular screen, 120x60 inches, at the Whitney Museum of American Art 1985 Biennial, to Jun 2.

statues of men and women mooning and flashing, and "more kinds of nakedness than I have seen since the last time I visited 42nd Street."

George doesn't like all the moralizing at the Whitney, either, though he likes it well enough in Raphael, and is always complaining about the moral irrelevance of abstract art. I myself thought it was nice to see so many artists coming out in favor of peace and freedom and against consumerism, nukes and destroying the environment. I was especially impressed by the new work of Jenny Holzer, who used to make wall posters, but now does sweet little electric signs with moving letters like the ones on Times Square. She has messages like "Put food out in the same place every day and talk to the people who come to eat it and organize them," and "Spit all over someone with a mouthful of milk if you want to find out something about their personality fast" -- so different from the kind of messages you see on Times Square. Cousin George says she sounds like a crazed Marxist feminist who has taken over a Chinese fortune cookie factory, but I say everyone reads Chinese fortune cookie messages, which is more than you

little aluminum panel half-closing each one in a different way. But it is a lot more than that. No one who is at all sensitive to form could fail to see that it is surrounded by an aura of peace and serenity. And no one who is the least bit attuned to symbolic form could fail to note that while each of the boxes is half closed, each is also half-open, as we must all be to one another if peace and serenity are to come to our troubled world.

The message is equally clear in Kenny Scharf's "When the Worlds Collide," which you can see from the same spot just by turning around. I mean it *does* look like an illustration from a horror comic book, as George says, but it is a happy, happy horror comic book. I mean it shows darling little otherworldly creatures, all red, yellow and orange, rising up from a desert landscape into a blue-black sky all filled with pink clouds and confetti and whirlwinds and atomic snowflakes and oh, so much more! I think it is a plea for love and understanding not only between people of different races, creeds and colors, but between people and all other creatures, no matter how strange and repulsive they may seem when first encountered. Which is just the kind of message we need in these days of space exploration and psychoanalysis. I mean if everybody in the world stood where I stood at the Whitney Biennial and looked from Mr. Judd's sculpture to Mr. Scharf's painting and *really understood what they mean*, I am sure there would be no more wars and inner conflicts.

So I don't understand why Cousin George is carrying on so. The 1985 Whitney Biennial is not only morally uplifting, it represents a return to all the traditional values like sex and violence, figuration and comprehensible meanings in the arts that George has been pleading for all these years, yet he says it ought to be investigated as a Bolshevik plot and a waste of the taxpayer's money. Some people are simply never satisfied.

Your art-loving niece,
Vickie Lou

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Editor & Publisher

in, provided it looks like the work of a comic strip artist or an illustrator with the shakes, but Julian Schnabel and Neo-Expressionism are out, except for Susan Rothenberg. Decorative painting is in, especially if the artist exhibits with Holly Solomon. Disco lights and sounds are in, especially when coordinated by Kenny Scharf, as in the second floor hallway leading to the rest rooms. Photographs are in provided they are huge, sexy and would never be shown at the Museum of Modern Art. Whatever happened to printmaking?"

Then George begins to rage and sputter about sex and violence at the Whitney— "bad as the New York Post"— which really surprised me. I mean George is such a traditionalist, you'd think he would be happy to see sex and violence making a comeback after all those years when art had to be abstract if it

Time Square. Cousin George says she sounds like a crazed Marxist feminist who has taken over a Chinese fortune cookie factory, but I say everyone reads Chinese fortune cookie messages, which is more than you can say for the National Review. I mean if you want to reach the people you have to speak to them in a language they understand.

Poor George, I feel so sorry for him. For years he has been arguing for a return to morality in art, but whenever he sees art that is concerned, caring and compassionate, he calls it Bolshevik. He even thinks sex and violence in art is Bolshevik, but I say it is concerned, caring and compassionate. I mean if everyone is repressed and can't find a satisfactory outlet for his or her libido and aggressions, we will have a nuclear holocaust instead of perpetual peace, and who wants that?

Anyway, I think all great art is

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