



"Big Fall," by Robert Yarber.

*Art: Whitney Presents
Its Biennial Exhibition*

THE 1985 Biennial has duly arrived at the Whitney Museum, though not all of it is completely installed at the time of this writing, and it occupies the whole of the second and fourth floors, together with the Lobby Gallery, the Lower Gallery and the Whitney's second-floor screening room. Painting, sculpture and photography, as well as a large and gaudy environmental installation by Kenny Scharf, make up the bulk of the Biennial, but there is also an elaborate and ambitious program of film and video. There is, furthermore, a noise-piece, by Liz Phillips, that is activated by sensors on the roof and broadcast by four loudspeakers in the sculpture garden. The show can be seen and heard through June 9, except for the part on the second floor, which closes on June 2.

Given that most of the artists in the show live and work in New York, the regular visitor to the Manhattan galleries is likely to find that many of the more pungent contributions are by people with whom we are already familiar. We do not need the Whitney Biennial to tell us that John Duff, Eric Fischl, Robert Kushner, Kim MacConnel, Elizabeth Murray, Ed Paschke, Susan Rothenberg, David Salle and Terry Winters have lately made a splash of one kind or another. Even less do we need to be told that Jasper Johns has "shown consistent growth and advanced substantially during the past two years." What is more to the point is whether the same could be said of the curators who are responsible for the show. Who are they to give Jasper Johns grades?

Although the choice of the show was arrived at by consensus, certain general preferences can be discerned. The show is big on decorative pattern-painting, big on photography and its manifold derivations, big on accumulative three-dimensional pieces, big on a gabby, cartooning, unanchored and overcrowded approach to picture-making, and big on bigness. Much of the show is characterized by a relentless crying out loud of "me, Me, ME!" as if art had regressed to babyhood. The infallible sign of this state is the determination to complicate and re-complicate, filling the big space to the point of claustrophobia, heaping mark on mark and image on image in hopes that somehow, some time, something memorable will result.

Among the younger painters in the show, it is probably Eric Fischl who raids the traditional terrain of painting to the strongest effect. Whether accidentally or not, his two big paintings have for their subject the extremes of life — infancy and old age. In "The Power of Rock and Roll," a tiny boy, Walkman going at full blast stands upright, as if for the first time with arms raised high. In "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," Fischl takes an unsparing look at the prospect (happily still remote) of his own definitive decay, and of the indignities that it may involve.

This is the first Biennial in which due attention has been paid to the East Village, with particular and justified reference to the Grace Mansio and P.P.O.W. galleries. I especially enjoyed the programmatic sculpture by Rodney Alan Greenblatt called "Ark of Triumph." This is in essence a pitch for enlightenment, freedom from prejudice and freedom from preconception. It comes with a list of the artist's heroes and heroines, and as these include Copernicus, Bernini, Elvis, J. S. Bach, Mary Tyler Moore and Jimmy Carter, I think we can assume that he practices what he preaches.

One or two of the more unexpectedly situated works should also be mentioned. Down by the restaurant are three photographic pieces by James Casebere. Made of very large black-and-white transparencies set in a light box and hung on the wall, they have a curious but formidable presence, midway between architectural model and reality. The Lobby Gallery is given over entirely to a presentation by an artists' collective called Group Material. This has a social rather than an esthetic purpose, and its object is to show the entire range of what passes for art in places where high art is not often to be seen. On the fourth floor, there is a video installation by Dara Birnbaum called "Damnation of Faust," which commands attention as much by its stately progression of its images as by their intrinsic handsomeness.

It should be said that within the limits of possibility the show has been very well installed. The good things (and some of them are very good indeed) take their place in a major museum by right. No imaginable visitor could like everything that is on view but then this is not that kind of show. It is a representative show, not a quality show, though attempts have been made to get the best available examples of whatever has been chosen.

It has to mean something, in that context, that one of the more blissful moments in this visitor's tour was the discovery of a sculpture by Robert Therrien called "Blue Oval." It is 15 inches across at its widest point, and just over 2 inches deep. Sitting quietly off the wall, minding its own business, it is a silent reproach to the frenetic activity elsewhere. But then, Robert Therrien, who was born in Chicago in 1947 and now lives in Los Angeles, is something of a find. His three contributions to the show have a quirky, unpretentious but completely fulfilled quality, and 1, for one, returned to them again and again.

It may also mean something that some of the movie stills in the catalogue have a cogency, a concision and a sense of secrets held in reserve that are lacking from many of the blown-up, blustery paintings and sculptures in the show. However, the good news about painting is that both Susan Rothenberg and Elizabeth Murray have, as the organizers would doubtless say, "shown consistent growth and advanced substantially in the last two years."

The Rothenberg called "Mondrian Dancing" stands out not only for the distinction of its handling of paint but also for the convincing strangeness of the image. Mondrian loved dancing, even in old age, and in this haunting image, Susan Rothenberg has transposed the scene of his cavorting from New York during World War II to what could well be the tangled woodlands in his Dutch homeland that he portrayed so memorably as a much younger man. As for the spectral heads in the painting called "Green Ray," their gaze has a truly startling penetration. Both these pictures prove that nothing can deputize, in painting or anywhere else, for the presence of one single inspired idea and the ability to set it out at maximum strength.

That particular point is made by Robert Yarber, a Texan now resident in California, in a painting called "Big Fall," in which two enigmatic human figures hurtle toward the earth, passing on their way an apartment house from which people look out with a wild surmise. Yarber has his idiosyncratic vision, and he sticks to it, and the result is undeniably compelling.

As for the two big paintings by Elizabeth Murray, they manifest a readiness to take a good new idea and run with it, no matter where it leads. These are paintings that tread a not-yet-named middle ground, somewhere between painting and sculpture, construction and relief, that is Miss Murray's own. In that they demand close, slow and lengthy attention, they too are out of key with the general tone of the show.

If the show, in general, has no flow, no drive and no direction, that may well be the fault of choice by committee. The great exhibitions of modern art are made more often by tyrants of taste, in a spirit of intransigent unfairness and outrageous exclusivity, than by good-natured people who want to do the best by everyone. But as to that, and as to many individual works that I have not space to mention here, much more could be said.

Also of interest this week :

Not Just Black and White (City Gallery, 2 Columbus Circle): This show, with Gigi and Paul Franklin as curators, has functioned as a small-scale local foretaste of the Whitney Biennial, aiming as it does to give a true cross-section of artists who now live and work in New York. Its title has doubtless a double meaning, but, as it suggests, the works are in black and white, and in a wide range of media. The show includes, for instance, a pair of pants designed by Les Levine that bears the same legend, over and over again. "What can the federal Government do for you?" it says, and offers no answer.

It also includes one of Hannah Wilke's cryptic anatomical sculptures, a frieze of drawings by Dottie Addie in which great works of art are epitomized (and sometimes a little roughed up), and a large drawing by Jonathan Borofsky with a caption reading, "I dreamed that blacks were marching for freedom and one girl said she would tell the truth." Add to all that a portrait of Che Guevara by Alice Neel and it will be clear that this is a combative exhibition. (Through tomorrow)

Clark Center Reception

Clark Center for the Performing Arts, which has nurtured and developed black and avant-garde choreographers for 26 years, will celebrate the start of construction of its home on Theater Row with a benefit "champagne and cinderblocks" party and performance tomorrow at the new center, 450 West 42d Street. The evening starts at 6 with a champagne reception and dinner at 7, including a cabaret featuring Charles (Cookie) Cook, Bert Ross and John Wallowitch. Starting at 9, there will be disco dancing with entertainment by Mr. Cook and Edwina Lee Tyler. Tickets are \$100 for the full evening; \$15 for the disco with reservations, and \$20 at the door. Information: 246-4818.

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