

## SURVEYING THE SCENE II

### The Emergent Factor

*A recent show at P.S. 1, devoted to developments in the New York art world since 1995, embraced 145 artists, dozens of curators and two major institutions.*

BY CAROL KINO

On the face of things, P. S. 1's "Greater New York" show seemed to proceed from a straightforward and entirely worthy objective. The first collaboration between the Museum of Modern Art and P.S. 1 since the two organizations joined forces last spring, it focused on emerging artists based in and around New York—a curiously neglected group. Today, though the city enjoys a thriving commercial gallery life, the tendency is to assume that raw creativity has fled to other locales such as London and Los Angeles. New York may continue to heave with eager, ambitious talent, but the city has a hard time summoning up a creative identity, in contrast to other more hegemonic eras, when the words "New York" could suggest a distinct form or style, like Abstract Expressionism, Pop art or graffiti art.

Of course, it's not only in New York that contemporary art eludes easy definition. Everywhere, artists work in diverse media, tend not to form groups and shy away from boldly stating their creative intentions—perhaps because so many critics and curators are now on hand to help figure them out. But who can deny that New York has also become a victim of its past successes? Those earlier eras spawned a voracious gallery system that tends to homogenize everything by pushing it toward marketability. But because this system offers such a profusion of opportunities, artists aren't compelled to create a radically alternative art scene, and the successful ones don't stay unshown long enough for them to develop any kind of group identity. As a result, younger artists are often forced to identify themselves by the most superficial of tags, from the neighborhood they live and work in (e.g., Williamsburg) to where they went to school (e.g., Yale).

Assembled by a team of curators drawn from both institutions, "Greater New York" aimed to refocus the situation by turning the spotlight onto 145 locals who've emerged during the last five years, and on creative trends and ideas that inspire them. Probably the fairest thing to say about the show overall is that it was consistently uneven. Just inside the building entrance, for instance, visitors encountered *I Must Walk Before I Run*, a perky mixed-media work by Erik Parker. In it, a New York City map painted and collaged in faux-naïf style has its street names replaced with those of art-world power brokers including MOMA cura-



Visitors "shooting" Arnaldo Morales's *Triobegun Iroik No. 98, 1998, air compressor, metal tubing, trigger mechanisms*. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, Eileen Costa, courtesy P.S. 1, Long Island City.

tor Laura Hoptman, who worked closely on this show, and SoHo dealer Jeffrey Deitch, who has exhibited a number of the artists included. The curators sent a very mixed message by hanging it at the start of an endeavor that was supposed to return attention to the creative aspects of the scene, rather than the surface careerism for which it's popularly known.

Yet right beside this ambiguous piece, in an easily overlooked nook, artist Clara Williams created a fantastic installation by covering the surface of a reception desk with a meadow of grass, rocks, resinous pools. Her universe of epoxy, wire, paper and acrylic, which appropriately enough was titled *Very Gentle Protest*, looked alternately real and fake, depending on how much you squinted. The desk's former furnishings—files, pads of paper and a Rolodex—appeared to have been stashed hastily on the floor, but such was the effect of Williams's deft touch that it was hard not to wonder if these genuine-looking office supplies might not also be simulacra.

In part, the show's hodgepodge nature may have resulted from the simple fact that the artists who've recently emerged here tend to be a diverse bunch. Some, like Amy Sillman, James Siena and Francis Cape, are relatively mature—late bloomers whose work wasn't in tune with the go-go spirit of the 1980s, and who were further stymied by the early 1990s art market recession that followed. Others, like Cecily Brown and Inka Essenhigh, are newcomers who've been lucky enough to have started out in tandem with the current market boom. But even granting this diversity, the curator-

ial criteria were sometimes a little hard to divine. For instance, although room was made for well-known figures such as Elizabeth Peyton and Shirin Neshat, many equally recognized and equally "emergent" talents who seem more intrinsic to the current scene were absent—Fred Tomaselli being the most obvious of these.

Further confusion may also have been introduced by the show's curatorial process itself. Curators from both institutions—reportedly more than 30, though no one at P.S. 1 seems to know exactly how many—suggested artists and participated in several marathon slide viewings and voting sessions, though only a smaller number made studio visits. The actual installation was carried out by six curators—Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Klaus

Biesenbach and Russell Haswell from P.S. 1; Hoptman, Deborah Wye and Paolo Herkenhoff from MOMA. While early reports suggested that "Greater New York" would concentrate on unearthing newcomers, this spirit survives chiefly in the catalogue and its accompanying CD-ROM, which gathers essays by 80 critics, most of whom seem relatively unknown (though the lack of biographical information made it hard to say for sure). The CD-ROM also includes some neat multimedia loops, as well as a floor plan, images from the show and artists' bios. (Most exhibition history prior to 1997 seems to have been omitted from these biographies, upping the "emergent" factor but leaving out some fairly major events in the careers of several artists.)

To the curators' credit, however, the show did include a handful of genuine discoveries, like Mick O'Shea and Elizabeth Campbell—relative unknowns who somehow made it in, perhaps via the early open call for submissions. Altogether, the resulting jumble made for a good reminder of what recent years have wrought in New York art and paved the way for some fascinating curatorial juxtapositions.

One inspired room saw Justine Kurland's photographs of girls wreaking havoc in American wilderness landscapes grouped with Brad Kahlhamer's Native American-inspired work and Jude Tallichet's loony "Song Sculptures." In one Kurland C-print, two punkish girls carry a dead buck along a dirt road; in another, a young woman wanders dreamily out of a forest clearing as



Installation view of E.V. Day's *Flesh for Fantasy*, 2000, blow-up dolls, wire, hardware.

hung from the ceiling to just-below shoulder height. It was composed of three air guns linked in a triangle by chrome railings and an air compressor in the middle that made the whole thing pound like a jackhammer whenever one of the air-gun triggers was pulled. Other work in this large space included Calvin Seibert's brightly colored pop gouaches of biomorphic, machinelike objects; Sam Gordon's silver-leafed painting of a mosaic globe and Michael Phelan's stack of interlocking glass tanks that held fake coral and real goldfish. On first viewing, it all looked absolutely stunning. On another visit, it still looked good, yet for me, the knowledge that these artists might all be working in basically the same vein suddenly made them all seem disappointingly derivative.

Perhaps that's why the show's strongest, most intelligent segment was the third-floor corridor devoted to prints and multiples. Here, linked by medium alone, some artists had the good fortune to show off the more thoughtful and intellectual aspects of their work. Among the better-known artists, Essenhigh came across especially strongly with a screenprint that abstracts two bucking broncos into a design motif. In this smaller format, the sense of perspective and design in her paintings intensifies, and the result looks intriguingly like a Japanese woodcut or an Art Nouveau print. Sculptor Charles Long showed a wonderful portfolio of Iris prints that seemed to replicate a notebook. They picture a group of Tanguy-like abstractions that look as if they've been drawn in pencil on yellow legal pads, but are really based on

the artist's computer-manipulated versions of his drawings. Other interesting works included Elena del Rivero's unique tire print on handmade paper; Alyson Shotz's colored Iris prints of hybrid flowers and Aleksandr Duravcevic's drypoint etchings of flies.

My favorite work in this section, though, was a five-part blueprint series by E.V. Day called "Anatomy of Hugh Hefner's Private Jet." The first print pictures the floor plan of an airplane, marked with points like "Cock Pit," "Powder Room," "Discothèque" and "Hef's private entrance." In subsequent prints, the demurely phallic-shaped object gradually metastasizes into a whirling explosion. Though this smart, stylish piece was certainly admirable on its own, it also revealed some of the thinking behind Day's installation *Flesh for Fantasy*, an "explosion" fabricated from bits of inflatable sex dolls strung on wire, which appeared on the museum's first floor.

Other highlights were some excellent videos, like Adriana Arenas Ilian's wry *Sweet Illusion*. This work paired a soundtrack of sentimental Colombian love songs with a three-channel DVD video. Two screens played mirror-image projections of cotton candy being spun onto a stick, while a third monitor in front scrolled oafish translations of the songs' lyrics karaoke style. Down the hall was Michael Bramwell's slow-motion video projection *Formalball*. Accompanied by a languorous jazz soundtrack, it shows an English country landscape in which a tuxedo-clad black man soon appears, dribbling a basketball along a lane. Passing cars repeatedly force him to squeeze to the edge of the road, as if emblemizing his outsider-ness. In another mesmerizing video, Jeremy Blake's digital projection *Angel Dust*, white particles drift in black space, until the screen gradually

Tony Matelli: *Gone*, 1999, polyurethane and artificial hair, 39 by 14 by 29 inches.



fills up with colored rectangles that build into a Mondrianesque abstraction.

The show also included some great individual installations. In a corner of the old boiler room, Ricci Albenda created a chamber whose smoothly finished white Sheetrock walls seemed to float above the floor (the Sheetrock was actually bolted into the existing walls). A sculptural relief on one wall was matched by a smaller negative version inserted into the wall opposite. Between the two sat a white, benchlike rhomboid that mimicked the shape of the chamber, creating the effect of one surreally distorted "white cube" within another. This installation also played nicely on some P. S. 1 history—until recently, the same dark, grotty space housed two of Robert Ryman's white-on-white paintings.



Chakaia Booker: *Nomadic Warrior*, 1997, rubber tires, wood, metal approx. 4 by 4 by 3 1/2 feet.

These and several other high points excepted, however, much of the rest of the show was a nondescript, unclassifiable, thinly linked patchwork, crammed into the building's every nook, cranny and hallway. It was interesting to note that at least two artists, Dylan Stone and Bob Braine, seemed to be inspired by 19th-century travelogues. But many more seemed to be finding their bliss by making wacky videos, offbeat animations, trite installations and mediocre abstract paintings. After a while, the procession grew mind-numbing.

Of course, one must remember that many other burgeoning scenes—most notably London of the early 1990s, especially as it appeared in the first U.S. surveys—have looked extraordinarily scrappy and jejune. And quite a few of New York's stronger new artists, perhaps because of the show's hasty organization, didn't make the cut or weren't given the chance to present their strongest work. Bruce