

Art

Indelible Impressions

At the Whitney Biennial, Several Artists' Works Linger in Memory

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An elephant appears on-screen, projected in stunningly crisp black-and-white. Near him on a bench sit six blind people, complete with dark glasses and white canes. One by one, they approach an animal they've heard about but cannot see, then explore it with their hands.

One blind man is delighted. " *This is nature,*" he says.

Another approaches, then retreats, shaken, after only a few pats.

A third can't stop talking, Catskill-style, as though the new experience matters less than how he can incorporate it into his established monologues.

Viewers of the footage, which went on view at Thursday's opening of the 2008 Whitney Biennial, feel a bit like its protagonists. We're instantly entranced by the quiet, solid nobility of the 35-minute work. But we're also perplexed about just what we should think about it and how it fits into the other art and experiences we've known. One thing we're sure of, however, is that we've had a powerful experience we'll need to keep revisiting, at least in our mind's eye.

Finding work like that is what any successful survey of contemporary art has always been about. Not a single lesson learned or a big-picture overview, but a collection of crucial moments and discoveries that we'll carry around with us for years. The Whitney Museum of American Art's 74th national survey, like most exhibitions of its prestige and scale, provides such moments. They may come from only 10 percent of its 260 or so objects, projections, installations and performances; only a dozen or so of its 81 artists may seem

worth keeping tabs on. But you still leave knowing more good works of art than when you entered.

The notion that a biennial will explore a few coherent themes, or that it will take the moment's pulse, is almost always a fiction. The "essence" of any art-world moment is usually imposed from outside, retrospectively, based on what a very few leaders turn out to have been up to. Most of what was really going on around them is all over the map and quickly forgotten.

There is plenty of work like that in this Whitney Biennial, as in every earlier edition. There are a slew of incoherent assemblages that might have felt fresh a decade ago. Also lots of slick reworkings of modernist abstraction and design: They may aim to comment on those precedents but really just revisit them nostalgically. Yet these works' weaknesses don't matter at all, and certainly won't be remembered in a few years' time. As at any moment in art, they're just the background against which a few more important creations stand out.

Of the 13 artists I was struck by at the 2008 Whitney Biennial, three seem to me to have made work that may have the most staying power. These three may not be brand new in everything they're doing, but their art registers strongly enough to have a good chance of lingering in a museum-goer's mind.

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Javier Tellez, the Venezuelan-born New Yorker who filmed the elephant, is a leader in this show. His projection, titled "Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See," achieves a wonderful balance between the documentary -- straightforward *showing* such as even the Old Masters practiced -- and the suggestive.

One of the work's most powerful suggestions involves its link to the ancient parable of the elephant and the six blind men. The tale tells how each blind man explored one part of the animal (tail, trunk, body, limbs, ears, tusks), then thought he knew the whole, just as we all imagine that our limited knowledge of the universe reflects the way things really are. Who but an artist would have thought to enact that story and record the result?

Tellez's enactment shows what simplifications all such stories involve: It demonstrates how the blind live in a world as full as all the rest of us and how their exploration of it doesn't end with a first touch and false impression. We viewers of the video are the true fools, for imagining even briefly that the parable might come true, as I believe we all think or even hope it might as we begin to watch this work. How many of us fully realize that the whole tale is just a philosopher's device -- that it's all parable, all the time, rather than a message based in fact? In real life, the blind are not defined by their eyes, any more than the rest of us are hopelessly deprived because we can't use sound the way bats do.

Think about it for a minute and you realize that the work's lack of color is itself a kind of

symbol of this truth. The absence of color -- it was actually shot on 35mm color film, then transferred to high-definition black-and-white video -- is more than made up for by the richness of its monochromes, just as it's said that the smell and hearing of the blind compensate for failures in their sight.

In fact, those failings can have benefits. The elephant-testers in Tillez's projection are a mix of Caucasians and African Americans, which the work's sighted audience can't help noticing right off. And then we recognize that this fact, salient and divisive for us, must be almost totally unknown to the blind, or at least available to them only as hearsay and in almost abstract terms.

Could there even be a certain clarification in paring down our access to reality? "Letter on the Blind" was filmed in a sprawling, long-abandoned Brooklyn wading pool, graffiti-covered and about as grim as any place could be. (The disused pool was borrowed from city government by an arts group called Creative Time, which commissioned Tillez's film.) We have to put some energy into filtering out the setting's ugliness in favor of the beauty of the work's main imagery and narrative. And yet we know that the figures in that story only get a whiff of the ugliness, while the gorgeous revelation of the animal that's at its heart stands out so much clearer for them than it can for us.

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At first sight, a new work by Omer Fast, who was born in Israel but lives in Berlin, seems fairly straightforward. For "The Casting," two screens hang next to each other in the middle of a blacked-out gallery, with projections on both sides. One pair shows a 14-minute video of a standard interview, with the interviewer (Fast himself) projected onto one screen and his subject, a young American soldier, beside him on the other. The soldier's narrative, recorded live at an Army base in Texas, has two parts. First the young man talks about a strange date he had with a lovely young redhead during his posting in Germany. Then he narrates a terrible experience that came after he'd shipped off to Iraq: In shock from a roadside explosion, he shot at an oncoming car and killed one of its innocent passengers.

Walk around to see the backs of those two screens, and you see footage that seems meant to illustrate the soldier's narrative. There are shots of the young man and his date at her home and in her car, and of the mayhem of the bombing and shooting in Iraq.

Fast seems to take a standard documentary's mix of talking-head narrative and live-action footage, then pull the two apart to live on opposite sides of his screens.

At least, that's what's up at *very* first sight. Look and listen closer, and the story told by this artwork gets impossibly baroque. (It's so complex that words can barely describe it. Washingtonians, at least, will get to have a full dose of Fast when an earlier piece, "Godville," appears in the second part of the Hirshhorn Museum's "Cinema Effect" show, which opens in June.) Though the soldier's narrative seems to proceed in the most seamless way -- it sounds like a simple tape of someone talking -- it turns out to make

surreal jumps between the bloody horror in Iraq and the romantic drama in Europe, and then back again.

The soldier recalls the shooting: "At the time I was like, '[Expletive]! You know, 'I'm gonna go to jail! I just shot somebody who didn't need to be shot.' I didn't know that kind of thing would just be ignored later on." And then, without the slightest hint of a pause, his voice continues: "But I ran back to the rear of the car and I remember yelling, 'And never call me again!' And I slammed the door. And she couldn't get in through the gate." We've somehow gone straight from death in the Middle East to failed love in Germany, without even knowing when we made the trip. By means of the most stunning, fine-grained reediting of the videotape from his original interviews, Fast has crafted a soundtrack that has all the hallmarks of a normal person's storytelling but none of the continuity or sense we expect of such a thing.



Of course, this editing process leaves the visuals from the interview even more disjointed; the slick cuts that make a new whole from the video's original sound wreak havoc on the images in sync with it. At one second the soldier's wearing a sweater; an instant later and it's become a shirt, even though there's been no pause in his speech when he could have made the switch.

Such improbabilities continue on the screens' flip sides. The deluxe visuals they give us of the soldier's stories must clearly be fake, since no cameraman could have been around to film the German date or the shooting in Iraq. Fast's costumed actors strike absurdly melodramatic poses. Or sometimes they aren't in costume at all; they wear rehearsal or audition clothes and are shot in an empty studio.

It's no news to anyone that the stories that we tell about ourselves and our times are mostly built from fragments and imaginings. But I can't think of any artist who has managed to depict -- you might say deconstruct -- the realities of that construction as subtly, as convincingly or as engrossingly as Fast.

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After the twists and turns of Fast, there's pleasure in the extreme simplicity of the premise behind a work by Mungo Thomson, a California native who splits his time between Los Angeles and Berlin. His "Coat Check Chimes" is what it says it is: The piece replaces all 1,200 hangers in the Whitney's coat-check area with new ones designed by Thomson to ring like orchestral triangles.

Thanks to Thomson, an area of the museum consigned to service infrastructure has been turned into exhibition space, yet without making much change in its function. As the new hangers revolve on two tiers of motorized racks, or when attendants place and remove coats, a raucous but also lovely sound rings out from this normally dead zone in the museum. And that sound changes in interesting ways with the time of day and weather. The chimes, which come in 10 weights and tones, get more or less muffled by the number and kind of coats being checked. The Whitney has been turned inside out, almost like a newly removed sweater, so that what's usually ignored now has a more immediate, instant presence than the stuff that you normally go there to see.

Surprisingly, that presence is visual as well as sonic. To make their sounds, Thomson's hanger-chimes had to be immaculately machined from thick nickel-plated aluminum. Which means that, when assembled by their hundreds on the Whitney racks, they end up looking like a fancy piece of high-tech minimalist sculpture. Or they could be the ultimate example of modern design's marriage of function and form. Although in this case the design has been so overdone and overbuilt that standard coat-hangers end up with jet-fighter looks.

Maybe most importantly, the piece also has a striking social presence. The museum's normal division between the realm of its patrons (mostly well-off and often white) and of its service personnel (ill-paid and mostly black or Latino) gets broken down in "Coat Check Chimes." Here, the laborers control the art while museum-goers have to linger around its edges.

Or maybe the social dynamic spotlighted in the piece is, unfortunately, the more normal one in a museum: The art seems designed for the wealthy taking their leisure; the normal Joes, hard at work in that art's midst, see it as just another sign of an elite culture that's keeping them down. One coat-check attendant made a face each time Thomson's hanger-chimes rang out -- which means each time he made a move -- though he said he wasn't supposed to voice opinions on the art. "But what do you *think* I feel about it," he said.