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American splendor

Every other year, the Whitney Biennial surveys the American art landscape.

And every other year, the art world howls in protest. This spring, TONY finds some things to love in the show that everyone loves to hate.

By Jocko Weyland

As the 72nd Whitney Biennial is about to open, its ever-impossible task resurfaces: The curators must try to bring before their balkanized constituency a fair and balanced, hip but not too trendy mix that satisfies every faction's tastes. And since their choices can't help but reflect the arbitrariness of an art world that often bestows recognition on the undeserving as it ignores others more worth of attention, the event has historically been a whipping boy for critics and the public alike. That its curatorial decisions propel observers (consisting in no small part of omitted artists) into fits of righteous indignation is exactly what makes the Biennial an intriguing spectacle. In assembling this year's lineup, curators Chrissie Iles, Debra Singer and Shamim M. Momin have tried to counter the art world's endemic insularity and fashion-consciousness with a far-reaching, eclectic exhibition (see "Triple threat," page 15). A look at ten idiosyncratic younger artists and collectives in the Biennial helps illustrate some of the show's main themes—including the preponderance of nostalgia for the '60s and '70s, an "obsessive working of line, surface and image," according to the curators, and the highly touted but vaguely defined "gothic" resurgence that shows up less as a specific allusion to literature or the Cure than as a fascination with all things morbid.

Laylah Ali

A sinister edge and relentless attention to surface are apparent in Laylah Ali's cartoon-inflected paintings and drawings. Her work takes her violence-prone, mutated, enigmatically amputated figures into an ambiguous, racially charged narrative that recalls a nightmare version of Edwin A. Abbott's *Flatland*. DEBRA SINGER: "It might seem kind of lighthearted, but what belles that pretty surface is often a scenario that is a little more insidious."

assume vivid astro focus

On the lighter side and in the collective spirit that has been on the rise in the past two years, assume vivid astro focus samples a wide range of pop-culture influences, from Peter Max to karaoke-bar videos. Here, Brazilian-born Eli Sudbrack and his team of collaborators will install wallpaper and sculptural objects, including "theater props" of silk-screened Plexiglas and a balcony. A video featuring Los Super Elegantes (who are also in the show, debuting their new musical play at the Whitney's Altria space) will be on

view, and AVAF will also put on one of the Biennial's site-specific outdoor works, presented in collaboration with the Public Art Fund. In mid-April, Sudbrack and company will cover a section of asphalt in Central Park with a semi Art Deco, semipsychedellic design to brighten the long long-running daytime roller disco party. SINGER: "[The installation is] an immersive psychedelic environment-and a philosophy about the idea of creative community."

Mark Handforth

Modernism and Minimalism are reworked in Mark Handforth's red-and-orange sunset made of gelled fluorescent tubes and a folded reflective highway sign. Instead of having the ready made aspect of Dan Flavin's light sculptures or Mark di Suvero's metal behemoths, Handforth arranges his objects in labor-intensive and slightly off-kilter evocations of popular culture and public space. SINGER: "It's like scavenged elements from the American roadside mixed in with modernist vernacular."

Christian Holstad

The concept of fictional alternate worlds with elaborate back stories is prevalent in a number of this year's Biennial entries. Christian Holstad's alcove will be extravagant, assembling a hand-sewn campfire and sleeping bags, wallpaper and an earlier piece that mixes references to disco, flower power, Jean Genet and Jack Smith (arguably the patron saint of the flamboyant DIY aesthetic), carrying on his memorial to rebellious spirit everywhere." SHAMIM M. MOMIN: "It has a very string radical political aspect and a kind of poignancy."

Julinne Swartz

Part of the Whitney itself will be altered by Julianne Swartz's intervention in the six-story stairwell. Known for creating bewitching environments using simple materials in unusual locales, Swartz will make an optical conundrum that mysteriously reflects other parts of the museum, accompanied by a recording of multiple voices singing-and saying-the words to "Over the Rainbow." The old chestnut will waft out of clear pipes through the bunkerlike space, prompting museumgoers to wonder what they are seeing and hearing-and where it's all coming from. SINGER: "She's interested in directing immaterial phenomena like sound or light, using very low-tech means."