

APOCALYPSE NOT

David Joselit

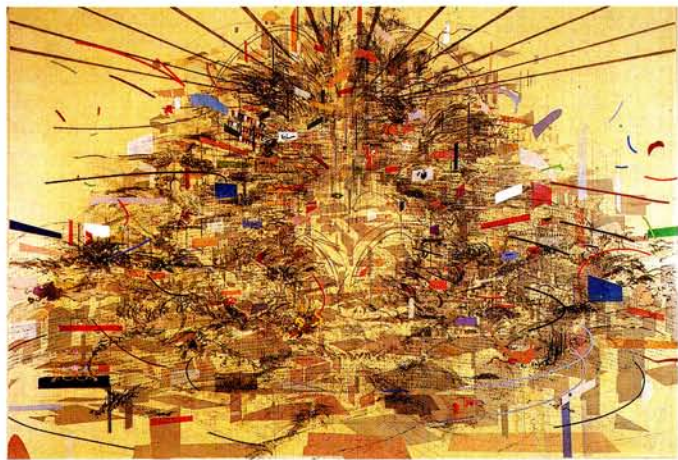
If you're trying to sort out the tangled themes of a Whitney Biennial, consider which older or more eminent artists are included in the exhibition—they usually offer helpful clues, and this year's installment is no exception. I came to the Biennial hoping to gain some understanding of the recent resurgence of painting, particularly figurative painting (a phenomenon epitomized by the John Currin retrospective and one that is widespread in galleries and art schools across the country). Given this preoccupation, three touchstone figures stood out for me: Raymond Pettibon, David Hockney, and the late Stan Brakhage. The last of these was, of course, neither a painter nor exactly a practitioner of figuration, but his eleven-minute film *Persian Series 13-18* (2001) is nonetheless exemplary of what seemed a widespread tactic among Biennial artists: exploring painterly issues through reference to film and the mass media. If Brakhage appears to be the exception in my group of three "father figures," Pettibon, a much

younger artist (and, again, not a painter per se), is central to the exhibition's zeitgeist.

Pettibon's assemblages of individual drawings, typically overlapping expressionistically and linked together conceptually by handwritten texts inscribed on the wall, embody three qualities that permeate the exhibition: an aesthetics of archival profusion as opposed to composition (or construction) of forms within a bounded expanse of canvas; citation of the rhetoric of cartoons; and an obsessiveness that has eschatological overtones very much in tune with this Biennial's much-noted goth sensibility and fascination with teen anomie. Not too many other artists in the exhibition pull off Pettibon's balancing act—typically, one or another of the three formal procedures he exemplifies takes precedence. In Zak Smith's *Pictures of What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow*, 2004, for instance, the archival principle, here indexed to Pynchon's great *Ulysses* of the '70s, domesticates the artist's obsessive impulse. Like its literary model, Smith's work

adopts an episodic structure through its arrangement of 755 page-size drawings in a grid, but the connection to Pynchon is largely metaphorical. While adopting different visual idioms ranging from cartoons to modernist abstraction, Smith's subject is apparently his own private milieu. As the catalogue proclaims, "The juxtaposition of his disaffected persona against a painstakingly wrought mosaic background reflects the coexistence of a rebellious punk attitude with a meticulous attention to formalism." As must be clear by now, what fascinates me in this Biennial is the thoroughly paradoxical combination of "punk rebelliousness" and "meticulous formalism." The two are seamlessly paired in this catalogue entry, but their marriage shouldn't be quite so harmonious: Indeed, in Pettibon's work obsessive content is allowed to deform formal meticulousness.

Among other artists in the Biennial whom I might group under the sign (if not the direct influence) of Pettibon—Laylah Ali, Amy Cutler, and Robyn O'Neil—an attraction to cartoon



What fascinates me in this Biennial is the thoroughly paradoxical combination of "punk rebelliousness" and "meticulous formalism."



Opposite page: Raymond Pettibon, *Title on the Line* (detail), 2004. This page, top: Julie Mehretu, *Empirical Construction, Istanbul*, 2003, ink and acrylic on canvas, 10 x 15'. Bottom: Zak Smith, *Pictures of What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon's Novel Gravity's Rainbow* (detail), 2004.

idioms is the dominant link. Each has developed a distinctive set of figurative avatars engaged in bizarre actions. Again, the paradox that percolates through the Biennial painters is registered in a catalogue entry. O'Neil's contribution to the show is a mystifyingly charming drawing, *Everything that stands will be at odds with its neighbor, and everything that falls will perish without grace*, 2003, in which pairs and groups of men in sweat suits engage in various vaguely antagonistic activities in a snowy landscape while a formation of fighter planes approaches them undetected. In a staggering use of oxymoron, the catalogue describes O'Neil's works as instances of a "gentle apocalypse." Now there's a category worthy of the Orwellian era of George W. Bush: the *gentle* apocalypse! Though I find it difficult to allow the massive disavowal encoded in this phrase to slip by unnoticed, it does capture one of the distinctive themes of the exhibition: violence and horror prettied up, or even—as in Sue de Beer's installation *Hans und Grete*, 2002–2003—made positively cute. In Cutler's gouaches, for instance, women engaged in humiliating actions are represented in a formal vocabulary reminiscent of children's-book illustration, and Ali explores ethnic struggle through an equally engaging cast of imaginary characters.

The perfume of facile, even camp figuration in conjunction with something akin to real bitterness leads me to my second "father figure," David Hockney. His canvases produce a world of surfaces so gorgeous that they virtually lift off their figurative pretext like an autonomous and glittering appliqué. What distinguishes Hockney from Abstract Expressionism, on the one hand, is that mimesis remains in play in his paintings; what distances him from Pop figures like Warhol, on the other, is his production of surfaces that are self-consciously showy and therefore not impoverished by their photographic genealogy. In short, I see Hockney as the exemplar of another kind of "gentle apocalypse": the engulfment of figure by surface (or, alternately, a celebratory version of the disaffected persona meeting meticulous formalism). Elizabeth Peyton's *fey* celebrity paintings (preciously small like Smith's pages and Ali's drawings) enact a fan's tribute of love through their lush revisions of pop magazine sources. She is the obvious heir to Hockney, as her positioning next to him in the gallery attests, but there are other ways in which the intimacy of surface and figure may be conceived. Sam Durant's redrawing of news photographs representing '60s protests, for example, situates the nostalgic gesture of repainting or redrawing in a context of visual poverty (these are "bad" or pointless reproductions rather than excited tributes), so that, counter to the pieties of twentieth-century abstraction, Durant's work allows the surface to be an agent of distancing or alienation rather than phenomenological identification. In Virgil Marti's environment *Grow Room*, 2002, malignant surfaces are extravagantly realized by using Mylar as a ground for a meandering band of psychedelic Art Nouveau floral motifs. Like many works in the exhibition, Marti's makes explicit reference to drug culture, but here the uneven mirrored surfaces, which distort the viewer's image and nearly overwhelm his or her perception of the floral motifs they support, produce a kind of nausea, or bad trip, within its cloying atmosphere.

The most interesting kind of painting I've seen exhibited in the past several years has possessed the malignancy of Marti's work, combining the slick surfaces of glossy digital reproduction with a groundless space redolent of the Internet: It is an art in which biomorphism meets crystalline geometries. The curators' inclusion of Stan Brakhage's *Persian Series 13–18* in the Biennial, with its constantly shifting hand-painted nonobjective forms, offers a model of what, in a nod to both Brakhage's legacy as an avant-garde filmmaker and Gene Youngblood's legendary 1970 book *Expanded Cinema*, might be called the "expanded surface" of painting. Such surfaces embrace real time on the one hand, through the cinematic succession of frames, and, on the other, they perform a layering of painterly gesture and cinematic projection. A number of artists in the Biennial seem to be mining these possibilities, but two stand out: Fred Tomaselli and Julie Mehretu. Tomaselli's works, like *Airborne Event*, 2003, are mandalas of sorts, sometimes centered on figures or elements of figures from which emanate psychedelic whorls and lines of force. But while they thematize psychic dematerialization, the surfaces of Tomaselli's paintings have a real, if shallow, depth: They are produced from photographic collage and other elements (he has famously included pills in his paintings), which are embedded in layers of resin. Mehretu, too, in her spectacular compositions reminiscent of giant

continued on page 233

JOSELIT/WHITNEY *continued from page 173*

scrambled computer screens, lays down marks and forms in as many as six translucent layers, creating a compressed but spatial, or *expanded*, surface. These painters have found not just a formal gimmick but a way to compress their surfaces in a manner analogous to the compression of digital files, while allowing them to expand laterally (like information and/or consciousness in a network society). Without sacrificing the metaphorical and discursive shallowness that feels fundamental to our time, Tomaselli and Mehretu represent its *density* in a paradox consistent with the "gentle apocalypse" and the "disaffected persona" rendered with "meticulous formalism."

This Biennial is a good one in the sense that it renders the flavor of a moment, but that flavor leaves a funny taste in one's mouth. I would like to believe that teen rebellion and fantasy figuration with references ranging from horror movies to psychedelic ecstasy are effective tools for meeting the particular challenges of our time. I certainly believe they can be. But significant art must make the journey from private obsession to public discourse, and many of the artists in this year's Biennial seem to have gotten stuck along the way. It's not that obsession must inherently remain private—sometimes the problem is that a countercultural urge is not obsessive enough, not weird enough in all its eager posturing. It all comes down to a certain density that, formally, I noticed in Mehretu's paintings and conceptually in Pettibon's installations. In the end it's rather simple: Apocalypse cannot be gentle. □

David Joselit is professor of art history at Yale University.