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‘Looking Back’: ‘The 7th White Columns Annual’

By HOLLAND COTTER

White Columns
320 West 13th Street
(entrance on Horatio Street),
West Village

Through Feb. 23

The White Columns Annual is a highly anticipated recap of the previous art season as filtered through specific curatorial eyes, different ones each time out. This year’s selection is by Richard Birkett, the curator at Artists Space. It’s a smart roundup, with many unobvious, un-Chelsea choices, which means that all those poor souls stuck in the “not enough painting” groove should stay home. A single fine portrait by Alice Neel, from a show at David Zwirner last spring, will hardly fill their needs.

Which doesn’t mean that there’s an absence of work that’s painting-like, as in the case of Martin Beck’s stretched-fabric wall panels and Henrik Olesen’s primed canvasses with lines of glued-on screws. Sculpture abounds. Yuji Agematsu, who showed at Real Fine Arts in Brooklyn last spring, has an entire room hung with tiny street-junk assemblages. A hunk of cedar propped up by a flute is a reminder of Gareth James’s recent solo at Miguel Abreu.

Sam Lewitt revisits the small miracle of sculptural movement he created from magnetic fluid and air at the 2012 Whitney Biennial. There’s a little knotted string thing by the great Harry Smith, and — the visual *pièce de résistance* — a wall-relief dragon with light-up eyes by Sam Pulitzer and Bill Hayden.

Video, photography and text-based work are in good supply. On tape, Alex Israel interviews pseudocelebrities: Bjarne Melgaard and the literary theorist Leo Bersani argue gay politics; Helke Sander takes us back, stirringly, to the youth movement of the 1960s; and Alexander Kluge turns the current economic crisis into a kind of global sitcom. Jason Simon assembles a memorial to the artist Chris Marker, who died last year, with a display of Marker’s films and books. In a beautiful tribute, Kaucyila Brooke photographs the wardrobe of the writer Kathy Acker, who died in 1997. And Moyra Davey aligns the lives of female artists and writers in her 2011 video “Les Goddesses.”

And there’s plenty of reading to do with texts by Chris Kraus and Tan Lin, and with Peter Fend’s minutely annotated collages, part of an immense project of news clips and e-mails detailing the effects of corporate power on ecology.

Piece by piece, the show feels cool and abstruse, like a set of conceptual locks to be picked. But once you get to work there are many individual rewards and a large overarching one: Mr. Birkett’s tour of personal highlights makes the art-season past look far more interesting in retrospect than it did when it was happening.