

## Michelle Grabner's Whitney Biennial is a grand "curriculum"

By Mary Louise Schumacher of the Journal Sentinel

**New York** — When a cumbersome banquet camera, designed to capture broad, encompassing views, is used for a close-up shot, its accordion-like bellows must be stretched open. It's a somewhat strained stance for the antiquated tool, and focusing is tricky.

Artist Sarah Charlesworth created a photographic diptych of a camera in such a position, silhouetted images in a reciprocal pairing of positive and negative.



At the Whitney Biennial, a critical survey of American art today, her "Camera Work" stands as an open question about the role of photographic imagery in art and society and an elegy of sorts for Charlesworth, who died just months before the show opened.

It's also an apt metaphor for the challenging position and vision of the curator who put the work in the show, Michelle Grabner, a Wisconsin native and an artist, critic and teacher who is interested in the perspective that surfaces from off-center places. She considers Milwaukee a sort of intellectual home base.

Her contribution, on the sprawling fourth floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art, presents an unexpected avant-garde, one rooted in the oldest and most persistent philosophical questions about the nature of art. While old-school in appearance, it's a radical corrective, offered with Midwestern politeness.

Grabner, who teaches art and criticism at Yale and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, is one of three guest curators who created a distinct exhibition within the show, the first ever three-in-one biennial. It's not the only American museum show to attempt to capture something of the zeitgeist but it is certainly the most high stakes, with critics, curators, collectors, artists and large crowds descending on the museum's brutalist building on Madison Avenue every other March.

To a wayward contemporary art world, Grabner offers a way forward by pointing back to its core questions. There is new life in old arguments, she seems to assert. Everywhere you turn within her show there are artistic resurrections — artists rethinking and reworking earlier ideas — which appear strangely contemporary.

It is a glorious defense, really, of intellectual discourse and art theory — explorations of the political, psychological, cultural and formalist approaches to art often deemed passé by a style- and strategy-chasing art world.

If that sounds academic, it is. Grabner calls her show "a curriculum," in fact. The first work you'll see in her classroom, if I may call it that, is a traditional portrait of President Barack Obama by Chicago artist Dawoud Bey, hung high as it might be in public schools and offices at the Department of Defense. This is a quintessential artist's move, appropriating someone else's work as a means for expression. Grabner, the first curator of the biennial to identify primarily as an artist, is signaling that this is a place of study for a wide public and that, for now, an artist (another down-to-earth intellectual out of Chicago, by the way) is in charge.

And while she asserts her authority, she relinquishes it pretty quickly, too. Also at the entry to her show is a huge but mostly invisible work, Gaylen Gerber's 40-foot-long canvas, painted gray, and mimicking a museum wall. On it, he exhibits artworks of his choosing, two large paintings by Trevor Shimizu.

So, Grabner passes along some of her influence to Gerber, who slips some to relative newcomer Shimizu, whose expressive paintings of women, one with her body splayed in what seems a nod to

Willem De Kooning, ends up in a coveted biennial spot. Part way through the show, Shimizu's ladies will be displaced by works by David Hammons and Sherrie Levine, which may kick back some prestige to Gerber by the nature of their name recognition. These exchanges of power and agency are a way for the artists to question the value of their work and to counteract the valuations of an art market that seems to value the wrong things.

It's also a terribly obliging, dare I say Midwestern, act of artistic generosity, what Grabner calls "platforming," a term coined in the '90s by Shorewood-based artist David Robbins, and a tendency that's become fashionable among artists in more recent years.

### **Looking at how we see**

Once you cross the threshold of Grabner's show proper, it opens up into two, massive, absolutely overstuffed, raucous rooms of art.

Artworks that root around in our thinking, that get us to consider the ways we frame our experiences of art, occupy the first space. It's a room of arguments, artists arguing with other artists and history, among other things.

Charlesworth's visual juxtapositions target our unconscious, personal and collective, with spectacular precision; David Diao tracks the effects of the art market on his paintings on the actual face of his paintings; and Ken Lum's Pop Art-like signage for fictional Vietnamese shops points to the history of war and histories that do and do not fall through the cracks.

Center stage in this space is Shana Lutker's irresistible, shiny installation, part art-historical re-enactment, part surrealist sculptural tableau. It is based on a notorious brawl among Surrealists, specifically André Breton who accused Max Ernst and Joan Miró of sullyng the purity of their movement by creating costumes and sets for a lowbrow ballet. Lutker's abstract re-staging includes a stainless steel mobile based on Miro's drawings, cast ballet slippers, mirrored surfaces and bright red protest fliers pierced through with a ballet bar and suspended overhead. The art-seeing crowd circling this scene animates the installation with movement and ricocheting reflections. We are implicated, and it seems that we could unleash the old argument held in a suspended state.

For me, though, the critical moment in this room is a contending with Gretchen Bender, a not particularly well known Pictures Generation artist like Charlesworth, who came to prominence in the '80s and died in 2004. It's a continuation of an investigation into Bender's ideas and work started some years ago at the Poor Farm, an experimental artist space in rural Wisconsin that Grabner runs with her husband, artist Brad Killam, and that most in the art world have never heard of.

Before the advent of the Internet, 24-hour news bombardments and an ever flowing torrent of media-rich artworks, Bender was remarkably prescient in her observations about mass media, which she called a "cannibalistic river." But she was horribly mistaken about the relevance of her own pioneering works, which she dismissed, calling them carcasses.

Proving her wrong posthumously, artist Philip Vanderhyden, originally from Menasha, Wis., has faithfully recreated a number of Bender's works in recent years. For the biennial, he remade "People in Pain," a wall-filling work from 1988 that was tossed out years ago. Movie titles for both good and bad films surface in neon from what looks like a sewage-like chop or undulating heaps of crumpled trash bags. This "cannibalistic" gush and insidious flattening effect feels quite at home in its 2014 context, a metaphor for substance being subsumed in a digital-age churn.

### **Women in rugged dialogue**

With brains properly primed, pondering the ways visual culture shapes our world, we are ready for the second, massive volume of art.

It's an arsenal of color, gesture and materiality that flanks our intellect and comes at us bodily. It's a room I like to think of as the power chicks' command center, a dense concentration of large-scale, expressive abstraction mostly by women such as Jacqueline Humphries, Louise Fishman, Sheila Hicks and Laura Owens.

These women are locked in a rugged and rigorous debate — a yelling match, at times — about a kind of abstraction most of the art world put to bed a generation ago. Each defiantly rails against the tradition of painting and the confines of the canvas, all while betraying a devotion to it, too.

Molly Zuckerman-Hartung resorts to common house paint and a drop cloth for her work, a hinged sculpture hung on the wall like a painting. She rips at her work with Leon Golub-style thrashings, while also piecing sections together with messy, muscular sewing. She covers the piece in simple mark making, zigzags and circles that she also enlarges into one, big exclamation: "NO."

Dona Nelson's exuberant, embroidery-like gestures with fat, dyed threads bleed beautifully into her works, which swing wildly off the wall. Amy Sillman defers to the art historical traditions of the grid, but a halting, curved green line, a landing strip-like blast of orange and an earthy, gritty central square hint at the real world and a sense of perspective. In her nearby collaboration with Pam Lins, the canvas bursts into carpentry, ceramics and painting that seems more conscious of gravity.

Sitting on the floor between these powerful women is a trio of giant basins, variously described as ashtrays or wombs, by Sterling Ruby, a man. Tossed inside the bowls are scraps of earlier works considered failures by the artist, remnants that take on the appearance of strange organs gorgeously engorged. Impressions from human hands cover the thick exteriors, which have a glossy hardness but a bread dough-like soft appearance, too.

### **A Midwestern contingent**

This is the part of the show where it becomes especially evident that Grabner is not trend spotting or enamored with 21st-century new media tactics. There are only four screens on the fourth floor, and many of the artists are in the culminating years of their careers. These makers have doggedly pursued painting, sculpture and craft traditions and are a gerrymandering lot, constantly manipulating the boundaries of their territories.

With so little film and video, the show is quite quiet. Still, Billy Joel's "Piano Man" intones from a back corner. It's one of David Robbins' TV commercials for contemporary art, a plug in this case for a show of work by New York gallerist and iconoclast Gavin Brown at the Green Gallery in Milwaukee.

The scene: A hopped-up and ignored entertainer plunks at the keys at Milwaukee's airport, playing Joel's chorus over and over, as if that's all he knows. The ironically named Renaissance bookstore, where used tomes go to die, is part of the backdrop. By turning this uneventful 47 seconds into art and advertising, Robbins makes the banality just a bit more odd. Even the fonts are funny.

Robbins buys air time for some of his commercials in a subversive but earnest attempt at seducing a more mainstream audience. In the context of the biennial, these subversions were especially delicious. Professional art lookers at the press preview appeared befuddled by his deadpan art-ads.

Particularly poignant and hilarious is Robbins' "Public Service Announcement (Independent Imagination)," also screening in the biennial galleries. In it, Robbins sits at an outdoor writing desk, initially addressing a small group and eventually no one at all, save an attentive stuffed squirrel. The gorgeous writing desk sits nearby in the gallery space, an invitation to settle in with your own imagination.

"Take the culture where you want it to go," Robbins tells us in his conceptual PSA. "Make whatever you like and except the consequences without complaint. Don't ask curators. Don't ask the marketplace. Don't ask New York. Don't ask Hollywood. Insist on complete access to your own imagination."

Robbins is a friend and intellectual peer for Grabner, part of a discrete coterie that keeps her practice partly rooted in Milwaukee, particularly since she finds Chicago's institutional hierarchies maddening. She often credits him with influencing art projects like The Suburban, the petite art space she and Killam run beside their suburban home. While Robbins has had plenty of art world success and lived in New York, the suburbs are his artistic frontier.

Two other Milwaukee artists were also invited to the biennial, Pedro Vélez and Paul Druecke, who like Robbins address issues of inattention and hope to cause disruptions.

Vélez is an artist-critic who creates stream-of-consciousness commentary often around issues of race, the state of criticism and beauty. He scavenges material from social media platforms and often takes on other critics directly, such as New York magazine's Jerry Saltz, who he calls Facebook Jerry. Vélez and I met via a Twitter squabble a few years ago, and have had a productive exchange of tweets, retweets and Facebook conversations since. He may be at times quite biting, but his practice is rooted in a fundamentally generous gesture, not unlike Gerber. He produced what he called the biennial's first review on a postcard he distributed at the opening, an amalgam of reflections.

Outside the museum's entrance, on the bridge between the hulking building and the street, Druecke installed a historical marker, the kind of official plaque that is commonplace in cities and often ignored. One of Druecke's markers incorporates scrawled names and graffiti, a cast of a Lower East Side sidewalk dating back to the '80s. Another, called "Near Here," a collaboration with artist Donna Stonecipher, uses commemorative language in a poetic, fragmented way.

Druecke is asking questions about what it means to leave a simple, personal mark or to pin down histories in public places. Museum visitors, even those waiting in line in front of the plaques seemed to look right past them.

Grabner's iteration of the biennial concludes with a series of quieter works, the exquisite bronze sculptures of Ricky Swallow, which mimic handmade constructions from humble material like cardboard; one of the most profound works about race-related violence I've ever seen, by Dawoud Bey; Joshua Mosley's stop-motion animation of a 1907 tennis match, with dance-like camera movements that drift off center to the sidelines of the action; and the working notes of David Foster Wallace, which demystify the revered writer, who hung himself in 2008, by revealing his earnest labors.

### **The mechanics of sight**

Finally, in the end, we step into a room that is a camera obscura created by artist Zoe Leonard by placing a lens in the Whitney's window, causing inverted images of the city to spill onto the walls, ceiling and floor. (It was brought into the show by another curator). Inside, we are in that stretched open space defined in Charlesworth's work at the other end of the show. The mechanics of sight is defined again. The experience takes time. Our eyes adjust and we are brought back to ourselves.

I had every intention of giving equal attention to the contributions of all three curators, including Stuart Comer, the media and performance art curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and Anthony Elms, associate curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, and I have promised myself I'll go back to give those shows a more thorough look.

But after faithfully attending the Whitney's biennials for many years, most of them a blur in my memory, I experienced something unexpected on Grabner's fourth floor: a welcome sense of orientation. I didn't want to leave her grand study hall.

Down in the basement near the museum's cafe is a particularly wonderful gesture by Matthew Deleget, who instead of contributing a painting, installed a vitrine with a gathering of seminal books on art and theory that he bought on the cheap, a stand-in for the ideas that individuals and institutions have discarded. Like Michelle's show, it's a rescuing and relishing of ideas.

And you see this theory pinging around the show. It is re-animated by a cacophony of wonderful, artist-to-artist conversations that recur and overlap in every corner of the show. It continues, too, in written form in the exhibition catalogue, which includes several dialogues, including a poignant correspondence between Milwaukee artist and critic Nicholas Frank and Brooke Kanther about the work of David Foster Wallace.

Grabner has created a deeply personal show, actually, one that plots the lines of influence in her own thinking and practices as an artist, critic and teacher who operates at both the heart and frontiers of the art world. It summarizes years of reflection on art and its deepest questions. We see her creative mothers in Fishman and Hicks, I think, and even a kinship between Foster Wallace's doodles and her own abstract paintings, to draw out a few threads.

Into the cannibalistic churn that is the art world today, which has found it fashionable to be sick of itself but offers very little by way of remedy, that discusses the "end of art" in both scholarly and superficial ways, Grabner has given us ideas to hold fast to.

The Whitney Biennial is on view through May 25 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.