



Flash Art

THE LEADING EUROPEAN ART MAGAZINE • VOL. XXIV • N° 159 SUMMER 1991 • US\$7

Opinions

A thumbs up, thumbs down view of this year's four-floor extravaganza of American art.

The 1991 Whitney Biennial

Christian Leigh

(selections are in alphabetical order)

The Ten Best

1. **CHUCK CLOSE** - Close's newest picture portraits show this master at the top of his form. They look vibrant and fresh, and in some ways, a lot newer than the work on the emerging artists' floor. In consideration of recent developments on the scene, Close's work looks better and better. And the portrait of April Gornick is a real treat.

2. **JOHN COPLANS** - These self-portraits are among the most psychologically (not to mention physically) revealing works in recent memory, and in the antiseptic context of the Biennial they look better than ever. What Coplans is doing is something like taking off a mask to reveal another, more complex mask. Where they embarrass is where they work best of all.

3. **CARROLL DUNHAM** - What interests me most about these Dunham paintings—a little Pop, a lot Cobra—is how well they succeed



INSTALLATION VIEW, ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG (LEFT, RIGHT FOREGROUND), FRANK STELLA (CENTER).

where, when, and how they have no right to. They're like a sick kid in an iron lung, who suddenly no longer needs the contraption to breathe. Fantastic!

4. **PETER HALLEY** - In what is supposed to be a narrow area of exploration, Halley manages to do just about everything. The paintings here run the

gamut from mourning to reverberating to wild and back again. What's most impressive is how much ground Halley covers without ever really changing a single thing. And the titles are getting pretty interesting too.

5. **RONA PONDICK** - Pondick's objects, which brilliantly bring together Pop and minimalism, blow all the other installation artists out of the water. The difference is this work has resonance as well as attitude. And, what's more, it makes great use of space—something this Biennial could have used more of.

6. **FRANK STELLA** - After this work of Stella's, nobody should ever do "scatter" again. It's the period at the end of the run-on sentence.

7. **PAT STEIR** - Steir looks extraordinary in this room, with serious competition Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein doing nothing to stand in her way. With one more on the mezzanine level of the museum, Steir's resonant drips do so many things so well. There's a brilliance to them that is perceptual; beyond the linguistic realm. And the trick is to go with that and then bring it back home.

8. **CINDY SHERMAN** - Sherman's tributes/subversions of high art models ring so true they hurt. They're like funny, cruel jokes on representation that just won't stop. They're absorbing in a way that makes each individual work feel like a feature-length film.

9. **PHILIP TAAFFE** - It's astounding to see how far Taaffe has come in only a few years. He's gone from being a promising East Village artist to being Cy Twombly right before our eyes. The two paintings presented here are flawless, exuberant, sublime. Talk about Masterpiece Theatre.

10. **MARK TANSEY** - For all of those who like to say that Tansey is a copy prankster churning out art world literaté-New Yorker cartoons, think again. What's going on in this work is very complex; touching on subjects art isn't supposed to be allowed to—philosophical, theoretical, metaphorical.

The Ten Worst

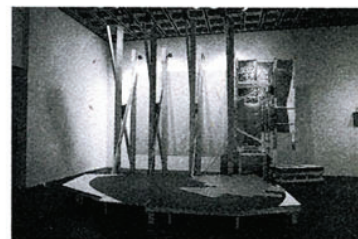
1. **VITO ACCONCI** - There's nobody in his or her right mind who doesn't have a great deal of respect for Acconci's art and ideas. But there also isn't anybody in his or her right mind who actually *believes* he knows the first thing about object making. This giant clamshell which invites visitors inside reminds me of something you might see on stage in Atlantic City in a Bette Midler show. It's fun to see once, but you'd never want to see it again.

2. **JENNIFER BARTLETT** - Bartlett's coy Four Seasons paintings have all of the appeal of really bad poetry—overliteral, sappy prose for the paper hat crowd. These are the kind of paintings you usually stumble into at an art gallery in Santa Fe or in an out-of-the-way regional museum somewhere in the sticks. And you wouldn't even stop to look.

3. **DAWN FREYLING** - This one takes the cake. Empty frames on the wall with the reciprocal glare provided by a large spotlight which sits on the floor, which looks as if it's been displaced from the nearby Jessica Stockholder sculpture. If Allan McCollum weren't such an interesting artist he'd make art as silly as this. It's got all of his weaknesses without any of his strengths. It's not even good enough to be offensive.

4. **DAVID HAMMONS** - Hammons gets the sour grapes award for refusing to participate in the Biennial because he's spent so many years being ignored. There's no better way to be invisible than to be excluded. Hammons should have been smarter.

5. **RONI HORN** - Once upon a time there was an artist who made boring if elegant and successful formalist art who went to bed every night and dreamt about John Baldessari.



JESSICA STOCKHOLDER, INSTALLATION VIEW.

6. **DONALD LIPSKI** - For years now Lipski's been getting away with murder. It's work like his that's buried the discreet object as a viable entity. The big rope-covered ball the size of Nebraska sculpture is about two years too late to be even remotely interesting. And the string-encumbered table makes the ball look like Rodin.

7. **ED MOSES** - Moses is one of those artists whose work you see in a Biennial and wonder what it's doing there. The answer is simple: He's been mediocre long enough to qualify.

8. **PHILIP PEARLSTEIN** - How is it possible to make naked people look so altogether unappealing all of the time without ever touching on any depth? Someone should send Pearlstein to John Coplans for some lessons in complexity.

9. **ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG** - Oh come on kids. Admit it already. Rauschenberg is nothing but an overrated egomaniac who happens to have some powerful people behind him. His work looks less interesting all the time. And those Gluts! Really! If he'd made them twenty-five years ago, maybe, but now—forget about it.

10. **JESSICA STOCKHOLDER** - Pity. (I like Frank Stella, too.)