

Pluralistic and Perky

By JACK FLAM

New York

Every two years, a curious sort of ritual commands the attention of the New York art world. The Whitney Museum of American Art mounts an exhibition that is dedicated to the predictably all-but-impossible task of showing what is supposed to be best and brightest in recent American art, to which large numbers of artists and critics predictably respond with jeers.

Unlike recent Biennials, which were organized in terms of rather particular themes or attitudes, this year's show tries harder to please. It takes a more pluralistic stance and aims to give what the museum's new director, David A. Ross, calls a "provocative and useful overview of American art today." To offer a better



The Gallery

Whitney Biennial

representation of artists outside New York, a committee of regional advisers was set up to help the Whitney curators make their choices, resulting in greater geographical diversity than in previous years.

The exhibition is also installed in a new way—which is decidedly more "useful" than "provocative." It is spread over the entire museum, with each floor dedicated to works by artists who came to prominence during a different period. So though all works were finished during the past two years, this year's Biennial has a stronger historical cast than most of its predecessors. It is, in effect, a kind of concise but necessarily incomplete Who's Who in Contemporary Art. Still, given the emphasis on pluralism, the woeful lack of serious abstract painting is as surprising as it is regrettable.

The second-floor space is dedicated to artists who became known during the 1950s and '60s, and includes familiar-looking works by Chuck Close, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Philip Pearlstein, Robert Rauschenberg and Frank Stella. The third floor features artists who emerged during the '70s and '80s, and includes almost equally familiar-looking works by Jennifer Bartlett, Eric Fischl, Elizabeth Murray, David Salle and Julian Schnabel. The fourth floor, by contrast, is given over to rather unfamiliar-looking works by less well-known younger artists, most of whom began to show just a few years ago—a kind of Who's Almost Who in Contemporary Art. And as if to assure us that this is, after all, really happening in 1991, there is an "AIDS Timeline" installation by the artists' collaborative Group Material on the ground floor. This relates the galloping spread of the disease to a number of social and political ills that seem to be held together by the connecting mortar of hypocrisy.

Although the chronological layering of this Biennial is intriguing, and even manages to give an aura of thoughtfulness to the somewhat amorphous contemporary art scene, it also contains some inherent hazards. If, for example, you start with the

more familiar and reassuring sorts of works presented on the second floor, by the time you get to the rather raucously installed top floor you may be put off by the feeling that you have stumbled into chaos.

Much of the stuff on this floor is—well, pretty much that: conglomerations of stuff. Rona Pondick's "Double Bed," which beckons at the entrance, is a cleverly off-putting floor piece composed of almost 100 baby bottles tied in sadomasochistic fashion to a mattress-like grouping of plastic pillows. Cady Noland's large untitled mixed-media installation brings together hundreds of Budweiser beer cans and seems to be based on the curious observation that Bud cans carry the same colors as the American flag. Dawn Fryling goes everyone else one better with "No Title," a room-size installation that is made up of empty picture frames and lit by halide lights that blaze so brightly you can barely look at it. The unbearable brightness, one supposes, of being.

And yet—although many of the works on this floor seem to have more strut than substance, and seem to be more concerned with flair than with feeling—there is an engaging openness and energy in evidence here. Whether these artists turn out to be among the best new talents of their generation, or are merely for a brief moment among the luckiest, remains to be seen. But they surely seem to be among the perkier.

One floor down, things are considerably calmer, and the dominant mood is more jaded, if more elegant. These artists have been tested by the market, and they tend to mind their manners. The first work you see is Vito Acconci's "Convertible Clam Shelter," a giant, luminous fiberglass representation of a clam whose outer shell is studded with real clam shells. It is witty and accomplished, but doesn't amount to much more than the visual equivalent of a shaggy dog story.

One of the first things you see on the second floor is Cy Twombly's "Winter's Passage (Luxor)," an imposing abstract, horizontal sculpture that balances exquisite elegance with a calm but insistent emotional intensity. In terms of sheer beauty, this is arguably the most impressive single work in the show.

Although most of the works on this floor represent a high level of accomplishment, the ensemble suffers from a sense of *deja vu*. There are, however, some subtle surprises. Frank Stella's massive aluminum construction "Watson and the Shark" contains some surprisingly literal representational imagery and is as close as Mr. Stella has come to sculpture in the round.

One of the most pleasant surprises is offered by Chuck Close's recent paintings. Although Mr. Close's subject and format have remained the same—large, frontal portraits—in these works he has achieved a wonderful balance between the large portrait image and the pattern of brush strokes by which the image is evoked. This is particularly evident in "April," which contains some of the most impressive pure painting Mr. Close has ever done.

In keeping with the spirit of variety within oneness, different parts of the exhibition have different closing dates, the first of which is June 16.