

Lesser New York

P.S.1 and MOMA want the wildness of youth but then they immediately try to tame it

by Jerry Saltz

March 28th, 2005 12:19 PM

write to us

e-mail story
printer friendly

I always go to P.S.1 with high hopes; I often leave deflated. "Greater New York," the mega-exhibition of 162 mostly emerging artists that fills 145,000 square feet of P.S.1, looks good, if not elegant, but it's no exception to this depressing pattern.

Within "Greater New York" is a cadre of remarkable artists dying to get out. These artists, and many not included, are beginning to break the psychic ice formed by slickness, hype, and money. But in selecting 162 artists, the six curators—four from P.S.1, two from MOMA—have shirked their curatorial responsibility, undermined their efforts with overkill, and made New York art seem pretty measly.

If "Greater New York" only had two curators and had been composed of 60 artists—each with more space to fail, flail, and interact—it would have been an exhibition rather than a coming-out party or cotillion ball.

Although the nucleus of this show is persuasive, "Greater New York" is a picture of an art world out of balance. The curators put out an "open call," got more than 2,000 responses, then mostly picked known works by known artists from known galleries or schools. It includes 28 graduates or current students from Columbia University. This survey within a show contains excellent artists, including Dana Schutz, Mika Rottenberg, Laleh Khorramian, Jamie Isenstein, Guy Ben-ner (who will represent Israel in this summer's Venice Biennale), and Banks Violette (who looks as good here as he ever has.) I'm a visiting critic at Columbia, and my rule is, "It's a good school if I teach there," but 28 artists from one place feels fishy. The curators didn't dig deep enough; they didn't put themselves at risk.

"Greater New York" is so completely geared to budding artists that there's a whiff of pedophilia about it, the feeling that if an artist is over a certain age he or she has already worn out a welcome. In fact, young as they are, many of the "emerging artists" in "Greater New York" aren't even that emerging: 11 have been in a Whitney Biennial, one—the always intriguing Carol Bove—has been on the cover of *Artforum*, the duo of Oliver Payne & Nick Relph has graced the cover of *Flash Art*, and over 100 are already represented by galleries. Some of these places are powerhouses like Mary Boone and Gagosian, although most didn't exist five years ago. Guild & Greyshkul, which represents a high of eight artists, has been open less than two years. This new layer of galleries, artists, and schools bodes well. What's harrowing is the level of total success that surrounds them.

The problem isn't success, however. While business is wide, it's only skin-deep. Artists still do what they do for genuine reasons. The problem is that P.S.1 and MOMA—along with the whole art world—want the wildness of youth but then immediately try to tame it. As a result they often end up killing it. This is the art world eating its young. At P.S.1 see rowdy artists like Nate Lowman and Seth Price turned tidy, or the work of Benjamin Butler, Lara Kohl, and others left to die in hallways. Tamy Ben-Tor's startling video "Women Talk About Adolf Hitler," featuring her in Nazi drag, has been hidden in a rear stairwell under a fire escape, as if the curators were afraid of it. (It's one of the strongest pieces in the show.) Artists needn't say "no" to curators, but they

shouldn't acquiesce so wholly to a system that's desperate for them anyway.



Tepee town: Justin Lowe's "On the Beach"
photo: Robin Holland

Greater New York

P.S.1

22-25 Jackson Avenue
Long Island City, Queens
Through September 22

Too much of the art in "Greater New York" is sprightly, companionable, light entertainment. The show feels sanitized, or MOMA-ized. It's fine that MOMA personnel helped curate this show; "Greater New York" isn't the SALT II talks. Still, somehow I doubt that MOMA will invite P.S.1 personnel to work on its upcoming Cézanne and Pissarro show. P.S.1 has also borrowed an odious page from MOMA's playbook: Only 37 percent of the participants are women. That's not enough for this show at this time in this place, especially when many of the better artists here are women (e.g., Kristin Baker, Misaki Kawai, Wangechi Mutu, Michelle Segre, Swoon, Anne Collier, Chie Fueki, Alda Rulilova, Laurel Nakadate, Huma Bhabha, Kate Gilmore, and Karyn Olivier). Equally ominous are the many horror stories about artists being mistreated by P.S.1 curators, of being cut from the show after they were told they were in, and worse. If these stories are even only partly true, P.S.1 better get its act together fast.

I'd name a bunch of artists who look good in "Greater New York," but that's futile in a show this large and indistinct. Nowadays, the art world is so speeded up that surveys like "Greater New York" regularly include graduate students as well as undergraduates. This is fine. Young artists should take the stage as soon as they want to, or can. There are a hundred ways to emerge, most more creative than this. "Greater New York" merely represents certain curators looking at certain acceptable schools and certain semi-approved artists who are coming up through certain "correct" channels.

The good thing about "Greater New York" is the core of talent within it. When I stop being annoyed by the curators' trivialization of New York art and I start thinking about these artists, I get high with expectation.