

## Art in Review

### 'LOOKING BACK': 'The Fifth White Columns Annual'

White Columns' annual review of the New York art season past, or just passing, is back for its fifth year, and most welcome. Unlike the multiveted Whitney Biennial and MoMA P.S. 1's "Greater New York," this recap-survey is produced by a committee of one, the committee this year being Bob Nickas, an independent curator and writer many years on the local scene. Ambitiously, he's brought in a roster of 42 artists, nearly twice as many as were in the largest of the previous annuals. But most of the work is small, so there's no sense of overcrowding. And the variety gives the show a distinctly personal texture.

How to describe the texture? Tough, prickly and theatrical, with mellow interludes. Collectively the works generate an uneasy, almost Goth atmosphere. It's there in Josh Tonsfeldt's little spider-web collages; in Andra Ursuta's ink drawings of disintegrating bodies, each picture displayed in a frame molded from dirt; and in a monstrous sculptural figure by Justin Matherly that appears to be made of concrete pillows.

The sculpture's morbidly snarly title — "The Degenerated Instinct Which Turns Against Life With Subterranean Vengefulness; See You Again in Your Muck of Tomorrow" — catches the mood I'm thinking of. And a nearby video tour by Amy O'Neill of a Mother Goose theme park from hell pushes it over the top.

Ms. O'Neill's nerve-rattling film is balanced out by the presence of one of Lily van der Stokker's ultra-cheery wall paintings, this one carrying written reassurance that "Modern artists are full of good intentions." True or not, the painting does offer some visual quiet time.

In 2009 Mr. Nickas published a book on new abstract painting, and he includes a restful sampling here: blue stripes by Michael Scott, a dotted grid by Dan Walsh, a linear pinwheel by David Malek, and some rainbow sprays and splashes by the polymath musician John Fahey, who died in 2001.

And then there's everything else: Minimalism old and new (Charlotte Posenenske, Jacob Kassay), Surrealism hot and cool (Karl Wirsum, Darren Bader) and homoeroticism from two photographers, David Hurlles and Alvin Baltrop, born in the 1940s. Mr. Baltrop assiduously documented the pre-AIDS gay-cruising culture centered on abandoned shipping piers on the West Side of Manhattan. He produced a huge body of work that was completely unknown in the art world when he died of cancer in 2004.

Mr. Hurlles, who for four decades documented the underworld of male hustlers in California, has also operated outside of any establishment. Completely incapacitated by a stroke several years ago, he now lives at a publicly financed nursing home in Los Angeles.

One of the things that makes the White Columns annuals so valuable is that they often include artists like these, who are unlikely to find their way into mainstream institutions. A second, equally important function that "Looking Back" serves, or should serve, is to provide a view of contemporary art that is not entirely determined by art-industry consensus — meaning the market — but rather is seen through a single informed, idiosyncratic, even resistant, sensibility. In Mr. Nickas that's exactly the perspective we get: a review of the season past that feels far more exciting than the season, month by month, actually was

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