

WEEKEND Arts
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This Biennial's Bustin' Out of the Whitney

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the bottles it comes in. The first 100 people to register on the Whitney's Web site (whitney.org) or at the armory receive a 15-minute portrait session with the British-born artist Ellen Harvey, part of her performance piece "100 Visitors to the Biennial Immortalized." The sitters get to keep their portraits — after they're displayed at the armory — and critique Ms. Harvey's work.

For those who feel needy, the Miami artist Bert Rodriguez will be holding therapy sessions inside a white box he has created: a portrayal of the artist as healer.

Previous Biennials have extended beyond the Whitney's walls, in 2004 a panoply of projects took place in Central Park for example. But at a time when performance and interactive art are so prominent, the Park Avenue Armory gives curators a variety of spaces in which to explore many art forms.

Rather than organizing the Biennial in a conventional linear path, the curators have organized it so the visitor picks where to begin: any room on any floor in either building.

"It's a choose your own adventure," said Shamim M. Momin, an associate curator at the Whitney.

She and Henriette Huldish, an assistant curator there, organized this year's Biennial with three advisers: Thelma Golden, a former Whitney curator and now director of the Studio Museum in Harlem; Bill Horigan, director of the media arts department at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University; and Linda Norden, an independent curator who has just been named director of the James Gallery at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. The nonprofit Art Production Fund collaborated on the Armory projects.

Starting in January 2007 Ms. Momin and Ms. Huldish visited hundreds of artists' studios. "It was basically doing a full museum show in a year, which allows for the possibility of immediacy," Ms. Huldish said.

These were not typical studio visits. Rather than plucking three paintings off a wall, the curators said, they spent considerable time hunched over laptops look-



RUTH FREMSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Bozidar Brazda's installation at the Park Avenue Armory.

ing at performances.

"It's not new for the sake of new, but how artists are working," Ms. Huldish said. "We looked at the idea of American art in its broadest sense."

In the end they chose 81 artists, fewer than have appeared in each of the last five Biennials. They didn't consider the armory and the museum building as separate entities, so 33 of the 37 artists whose work is in the armory also have projects in the museum. More than three-fourths of the works in this Biennial are site specific, and many were created specifically for this event.

As is always the case certain themes emerge. This year, the curators said, the ephemeral nature of art, time and memory are all being explored, as are architectural forms.

"Artists are engaged in notions of the postindustrial American landscape," Ms. Huldish said, "including the legacy of modernism and of midcentury American architecture and design."

Phoebe Washburn, known for transforming large-scale installations into self-contained architectural environments, has created an ecosystem, planting paperwhites in brightly colored golf balls immersed in 60 gallons of circulating Gatorade.

The armory's rich history — its regiment volunteered for duty in the War of 1812 and was among the first militias to march to the defense of Washington in the Civil War — has also inspired some artists. In one of its period bathrooms Michael Queenland fashioned a large chandelier from Ping Pong balls, humble materi-

als hanging in a historic setting. Matthew Brannon will record the sounds of the Armory at night and use them in a haunted house film; at the museum he is installing a setlike room in which heavy drapes surround a painted window looking out at a panorama of the New York City skyline, with everything somewhat off kilter.

The Norwegian-born Gardar Eide Einarsson has designed a flag for the armory's stairwell and encased a Brooks Brothers suit in one of the rooms, a comment on authority. Corey McCorkle's film documents the Knickerbocker Grays, the children's military organization, practicing in the armory; it will be shown daily in the museum.

In one period room the Canadian-born multimedia artist Bozidar Brazda has hung a metal chair upside down from the ceiling, so that it vaguely resembles a radio antenna. The recorded voices of people calling into a radio show can be heard, while a microphone picks up ambient sounds from visitors to the room.

Politically charged art often surfaces at the Biennial and this year, with war in Iraq and a presidential election, it would be natural to expect a lot of it. But the curators say that while some pieces have political messages, those messages are fairly subtle. An exception may be a video by Omer Fast, "The Casting," in which he interviewed Iraq veterans.

There are more lighthearted moments this year too, but some are easy to miss. The museum's sculpture court, for example, has been transformed into "Animal Estates," an installation by the California artist Fritz Haeg. A mini-zoo, it is made up of habitats for 12 animals, including a beaver lodge and houses for a duck and owls.

When asked if there will be live animals, Ms. Huldish said only that "there might be."

One of the installation's details that could be easily overlooked is a giant bald eagle's nest perched, somewhat precariously, on the overhang of the Marcel Breuer-designed museum. Neighborhood birds have already discovered it, but visitors to the Biennial need to be sharp eyed.

That's part of the fun. "People like looking," Ms. Momin said. "And finding things."