

The New York Times

Arts & Leisure

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 2000

ART / ARCHITECTURE

A Roll Call of Fresh Names and Faces

By DEBORAH SOLOMON

IF you keep up with contemporary art and have spoken to anyone besides your dentist in recent weeks, you've probably been asked your opinion on the P.S. 1 vs. the Biennial question. No, that's not a landmark court case concerning the First Amendment, but rather an unofficial face-off between two much-mooted museum exhibitions. The question is this: which is the better show?

"Greater New York," at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, the newly annexed Queens outpost of the Museum of Modern Art, is a spirited affair that rounds up enough youngish artists (146 in all) to start a day camp. The 2000 Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, despite its broader, cross-the-country sweep, is similarly well-stocked with unfamiliar names; its 97 artists do not include Jasper Johns, Brice Marden or any other sacred cows. The latest art-world trend is untrendy artists.

On the surface, the P.S. 1 show feels more rambunctious and alive, which may simply be a function of context. The works on view pick up reflected energy from their "Grease"-like setting, a big, meandering former public school with institutional-green walls, linoleum floors and a lunchroom. The Whitney, by contrast, has a Madison Avenue stiffness, and meals must be taken in staid Sarabeth's. But the Biennial does offer at least one advantage over the P.S. 1 show. By mingling new names with a handful of post-adolescent veterans (Richard Tuttle, Robert Gober and John Currin, among them), it reminds us that art is a long-haul deal and that the winners are the ones who sustain their vision over time.

All in all, the two exhibitions have more in common than the curators of either might care to acknowledge. Each show abounds with inspired moments, but has no center or defining direction. Perhaps that's because each was organized by a team of six curators. Call it the new sextuple approach; it offers the illusion of egalitarianism and suggests that museums are seeking to break up the reign of the New York galleries, or at least to prove that museums, too, can discover new names.

The two shows share some artists, but surprisingly few. Six artists overlap: E. V. Day, Paul Pfeiffer, Shirin Neshat, Chakaia Booker, Ghada Amer and Lisa Yuskavage, only one of whom works in oil-on-canvas and all of



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

E. V. Day's "Bombshell," from the series "Exploding Couture," 1999, is installed in the lobby of the Whitney Museum.

whom live in New York. In an age enamored of blurred boundaries, they seem destined to be known as the Cross-Exhibitors.

E. V. DAY proves it is possible to study critical theory in graduate school and emerge with your sense of humor intact. Her blown-up party dresses, floor-to-ceiling installations in which silky tatters appear to be caught in midblast, inves. deconstruction with wit and panache. At first, her work might strike you as the irate gesture of a fashion slave-turned-terrorist, but Donna Karan and other couture queens need not worry. In the end, Ms. Day lets pleasure win out over rage. Her not-to-be-missed installation in the Whitney's lobby, "Bombshell" (1999) — a detonated replica of the dress worn by Marilyn Monroe in "The Seven-Year Itch" — puts you in mind of things flying, female and climactic, including those Renaissance ascension scenes in which the Virgin hovers in midair, her robes swirling, her face pure rapture.

"I'm not a shopper," said Ms. Day, a 32-year-old New York native who studied at Yale and whose first solo show opens at Henry Urbach Architecture in Chelsea on April 28. "I've been in Bergdorf's only once, and it reminded me of my great-grandmother's. I prefer Niketown, where the manipulation is incredible. You don't go to Niketown to buy sneakers. You go there because it's an event."