

Process makes

PERFECT

by Meg Farmer

"It's not just random shit you know," an older gentleman insisted to his wife as they strolled through the Whitney Museum of American Art's illustrious 75th Biennial. "I know, I know," she defended, "but it looks like random shit." As entertaining as this banter was, the lady nailed it: it did look like random shit.

Unlike previous years, this edition has no theme anchoring it. In all its unfussiness, the show's "2010" title gives the collection permission to float in ungoverned waters. For better or worse, there are a lot of unruly surprises and crashing waves.

Curators Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari hope the show reflects American art right now: nothing more, nothing less. An almost frustratingly broad objective no doubt, but it does offer a spectrum of work that ranges in emotion: from anxiety to optimism. As a survey it may seem slapdash at times, but for the MVPs of the show, their work mutually celebrates the magic of the artist's process. These artists have solid technique, which is evident from their mind-blowing process.



Lesley Vance paints still life, but you wouldn't know that looking at the sensual abstractions they become. She makes still life arrangements of found organic objects, like rocks and shells. She photographs the arrangement in dramatic lighting, and then paints from the photos.

For her, the extra step of photography is one step backwards from the object, which is exactly what she wants. Vance drew inspiration Francisco De Zurbarán's 17th century still life painting with lemons and how abstract they appear.

Citing older references, she found a welcoming form that was almost non-representational. "There wasn't much abstraction that felt warm and intimate," she explains in regards to contemporary work. And that's exactly how her work feels: warm and intimate.

She transforms ordinary objects into odd luminous forms against a dark background. They reveal nothing about the original item, but retain all of the volume and light reflecting qualities. And, without obvious reference, they contend with all the drama of her 17th century inspiration.

Setting up environments is no stranger to James Casebere, an artist who is a pioneer of constructed photography. His digital chromogenic prints are quiet landscapes of houses. Enormous in scale and built with truly modest materials—Styrofoam, plaster and cardboard—these small suburban towns are built as tabletop models and dressed up with dazzling mood lighting, and then photographed.

The finished scenes are nothing short of enthralling. Through his painstaking and involved process, you are transported to the place before you, which glows and breathes with mood. Each diorama holds juicy secrets in the hush of its stillness. The mood of his work is a bit somber, but you do feel invited to these places, as they are void of a human presence.

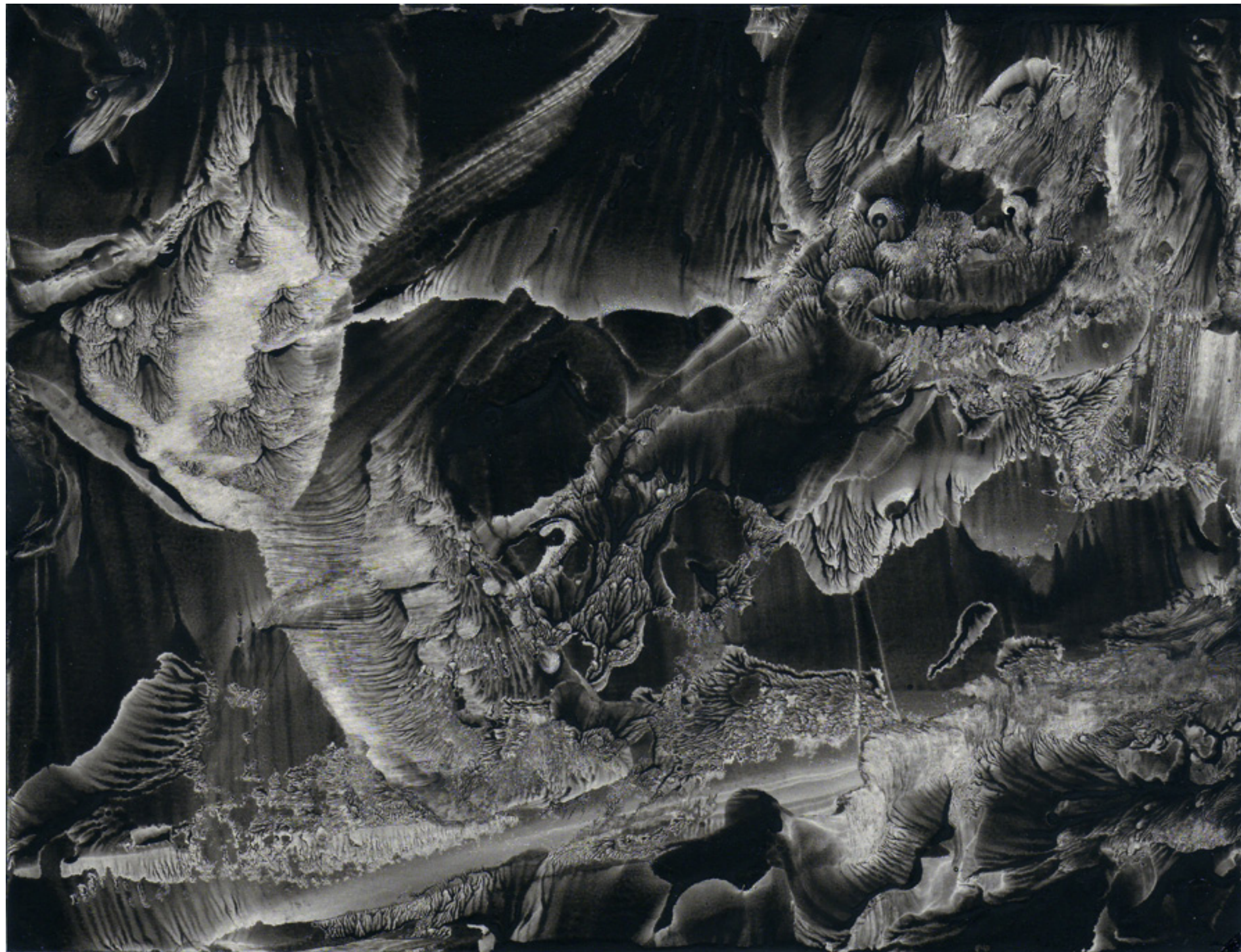


Equally inviting is an entire wall of small sumi ink drawings by Roland Flexner. The 5.5 x 7 inch works contain dark ambiguous worlds, that at times, appear cavernous or reveal the surface of some orbiting planet in a distant sunless galaxy.

This interpretation comes as no surprise once you learn that Flexner cites one of his inspirations as the 17th century European trend of collecting geological samples of rocks and stones. What is most intriguing is how Flexner “draws” them.

His process is based on a Japanese decorative art technique where sumi ink is placed in a pool of water or gelatin and paper is placed on the surface of the mixture, resulting in a marbled effect.

Flexner, however is no traditionalist, he ventures off the beaten path. He tilts, blows on, or blots the paper just before the ink is absorbed. The intimate scale of Flexner's work doesn't mean that these places feel small, that's the delight in them: his tiny creations are illusions of vast, endless spaces.





Amusingly, Pae White does the opposite. She takes the fleeting and ordinary, smoke curling through the air, and expands it into a 21.5 foot long woven tapestry, simply titled "Still. Untitled."

That's right, realism by way of the old school crafting of woven fibers. White notes her interest in helping the fiber achieve its "dream of becoming something other than itself." The charm of the piece lies in this juxtaposition. The ephemeral becomes lasting in its material form. The typically unnoticed, becomes breathtaking.

It's the work you get up close to, because you can't believe it, like in a magic eye poster or a Chuck Close painting (equally amazing). Up close is where you see all the hidden purples.



Speaking of magic eye posters, Jim Lutes expressionistic paintings incorporate subtle portraits. He works with egg tempera—a homemade mixture of powdered pigment and egg yolk. It dries fast and offers lots of play with paint density, making it a perfect layering tool.

Artists like Botticelli favored this medium during the Renaissance, but Lutes is not going completely old-school on us. His contemporary works push the boundary of representational painting, blurring the line between portrait painting and expressionistic painting. Lutes's paintings give you an enjoyable glimpse of a schizophrenic moment as you watch the paint lose contact with the represented environment and vice versa.

Portraiture triumphed in this year's Biennial.

Storm Tharp stole the show with his weird and wonderful characters. His characters are not based on people, but rather from chance and play. He begins by painting facial contours with only water, before it dries, he applies mineral ink and allows it to bleed and mushroom into fascinating mark-making shapes.

His process is an arduous one. It's done in many layers and slowly, until the personality emerges. Although fate decides where the ink goes, Tharp does honour the light sources on the forms, which make his subjects appealingly real. The images are slightly creepy, which is a compliment.

In Pigeon (After Sunshen), a young girl with fluorescent pink hair clutches a knife. Her stance could be construed as aggressive or defensive. Tharp is careful to leave his narratives open-ended while maintaining slightly mythic characters. In the periphery of his work lies evidence of his process: different gradients of washes of ink. This only adds to the history of the portrait.





Another showstopper is Aurel Schmidt's *Master of the Universe: FlexMaster 3000*, an intimidating seven-foot-tall drawing of a Minotaur. It's intimidating, until you see that it's made of beer cans, cigarettes, bananas, flies, cell phones, flowers, bottle caps, and condoms.

At first, it's hilarious; then it's intriguing. Your mind is overloaded with masculine objects and rubbish in a completely absurd way.

"It's really an insane portrait of a man, but it's interesting to explore what is masculine and makes it look sexual and positive," explains the 27-year-old. Schmidt is also a fan of the pun and poking fun at her subjects: for example she takes a muscular six-pack-goes-on-heroic men, and places a six-pack of Bud heavies beside him—but it's not all for laughs.

Her beast is constructed from our rubbish, which is an obvious nod to the cycle of life. While her drawings aren't pretty, they are done with remarkable detail.

Those that understand how much effort, care, and time it takes to draw well, will certainly appreciate this work.

And it is beautiful.

These were the unforgettable images, that, even in the untamed waters of the "2010" Whitney biennial, were tethered together by fascinating, painstaking, and inventive process-driven approaches. If anything, this is biennial restores the care and imagination of the artist.

The Whitney Biennial is on view through May 30th, 2010.