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TIME

Art: Major Art Attack

By **RICHARD LACAYO** Monday, Mar. 29, 2004

Face it, you love the Whitney Biennial. You love a show that gives you, every two years, an opportunity to bemoan the state of art today, all those craven dealers, politically correct curators and jejune, salacious, hectoring artists. Well, good news: the 2004 edition of the Biennial is now open. With 108 mostly lesser-known contributors from around the U.S., it is sure to have something to make your skin crawl. But there are also those rare things, artists worth looking at. Here are three:

ALEC SOTH At the River's Edge

The way Alec Soth sees it, the Mississippi River is a body of water bordered by dream states. Five years ago, he set out on the first of a series of trips that evolved into a project he calls "Sleeping by the Mississippi." Traveling mostly by car, he took photographs along the entire length of the river, from the upper reaches near his home in Minneapolis, Minn., to the delta country in Louisiana. He set out, he says, with no agenda other than "to photograph, and to figure it out as I went along."

What Soth, 34, found along the Mississippi was a full range of fugitive atmospheres and human eccentricities. The mood in his pictures can be drowsy, lonely, lyrical and sometimes just a bit surreal. He works within the great tradition of personal documentary that stretches from Walker Evans through Robert Frank to Soth's teacher, Joel Sternfeld. Though that tradition was pushed aside somewhat by the postmodern antics of the 1980s and the digitally manipulated images of the '90s, Soth's pictures are proof of its enduring strength and ragged glories.

This is not snapshot photography. Soth works in the slow rhythm of the river, with a big 8X10 camera that might as well be a boulder. It requires him to slide in a separate film holder of that size before each duly considered shot. What he does is also not always "pure" documentary. To concentrate the mood or distill a point, he will rearrange things--furniture, objects, backgrounds--to suit himself. "Using that camera," he says, "it's like you're making a painting."

And like a painting, or at least a good one, Soth's photographs have layered meanings. At first glance his picture of Sugar's, a place in Davenport, Iowa, appears to show a room where everything--the upholstered chair, the thick synthetic pile of the carpet, the strident green walls--reaches toward some misconstrued and imperfectly realized ideal of home. But the plot thickens once you know that this awkward chamber is the "green room" of a small-city brothel. (That copy of *Hustler* on the floor is a hint. So is the picture's title.) That room may be empty, but it can still tell you plenty about how men may stray far from home while their longings and desires do not.

CECILY BROWN Whispers of Eros

Is Cecily Brown's inclusion in this year's Biennial proof that she has survived her own hype? Ever since she arrived in Manhattan 10 years ago from her native London, Brown, 34, has been a perennial rising star. For a while she was also something of an art babe, with spreads in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* that dwelt as much on her looks as her brushwork. And like any good postfeminist, she took her bows and played to that image, working in a palette heavy on girly pinks and occasionally signing her canvases "Cecily." You know, like Cher.

And the canvases? They were tumultuous, freely painted scenes adroitly situated along the luscious, porous border between abstraction and figuration. In Brown's work, pigment can dematerialize the very forms it assembles. But when recognizable images emerge, they tend to be recognizably about sex. Explicit genitalia and explosive couplings are not uncommon, though for a while she liked to put rabbits in place of humans.

"I didn't know sex would be at the center of my work for so long," she says. "I sometimes wonder if I'm going to outgrow it." But with Brown it's not just the imagery that's erotic; it's the paint itself. She has a swashbuckling way with a brush. She knows something about the carnal qualities of oil paint, how the lustrous muck of pigment is the great correlative for everything moist and blending and libidinal.

The daughter of the late British art critic David Sylvester, Brown also knows that behind her images stand Willem de Kooning's grinning women in their storms of whiplashing abstraction. So do the erotic wrestlings of Francis Bacon, in those arenas where it's the body that's always the contested ground. But what appeals to her most, she says, is a "restrained carnality"--what you find in Velazquez or Chardin. "I'd like to make a painting where the sex is all implicit."

So here's *Black Painting 2*, in which a recumbent female may or may not be touching herself sexually with a faintly indicated hand. Above her head, the dark flood of the subconscious pumps. Lately Brown is even painting pure landscapes. "Woods and trees," she says. "It's very British." True enough, but keep an eye out for what's going on behind those bushes.