

The New York Times

Phoebe Washburn

'Nunderwater Nort Lab'

Zach Feuer Gallery
548 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Aug. 12

'Temperatures in a Lab of Superior Specialness'

Mary Boone Gallery
745 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street
Through July 29

The convention of super-large, labor-intensive structures in art galleries is getting a bit worn and familiar, perhaps, but Phoebe Washburn's latest effort squeaks by. For one thing, she helped formulate the genre, or at least an obsessively D.I.Y., lavishly recycled, hilariously pseudo-scientific subcategory of it. For another, "Nunderwater Nort Lab" is the most monolithic piece Ms. Washburn has yet made, and it has an insouciant sculptural formidability that is unusual to her work.

Filling nearly the entire space at the Zach Feuer Gallery, it is an immense, looming, (dare we say?) Serra-like cylinder. Except that it has been bricked together from hundreds of two-by-fours from previous Washburn installations and has a radiant, patchwork effect.

The edifice is a kind of greenhouse. At least there are plants in the wormhole windows, also made from the two-by-fours that extend deep inside, like small tunnels or large telescopes. These openings provide tantalizing glimpses of life within, where interns regularly tend the plants, cook and eat lunch and listen to music. (The work is also more continuously occupied than most Washburn pieces.) But you never get a clear notion of the structure's internal volume or what's going on inside, and this disorienting effect may be the most interesting aspect of the piece. The outside and inside feel unusually far apart and unrelated.

At Mary Boone, Ms. Washburn continues to experiment with smaller, more portable and, by implication, salable works with a series of reliefs that lean on or hang from the wall. Here, lab-worthy folding tables and chairs, folded, serve as frames, their undersides covered with different combinations of painted gravel or seashells and chunks of wood. The effect is of specimen trays or filters. These works are pleasantly decorative, but too contained. They lack the bristle and sprawl of Ms. Washburn's larger efforts, acting like paintings rather than sculptures.

ROBERTA SMITH



Phoebe Washburn's cylindrical "Nunderwater Nort Lab" at the Zach Feuer Gallery.

The New York Times

Phoebe Washburn

*Zach Feuer
530 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through Oct. 4*

Over the past few years Phoebe Washburn's installations have evolved from wavelike aggregations of scrap wood to a more sophisticated form of recycling:

working "ecosystems" of plants, water and sports drinks. Consumerism enters the picture in her latest site-specific project, which demonstrates a hyper-awareness of "green" technology and its ubiquity as a marketing strategy.

In a Rube Goldberg-esque process, a series of pumps and hoses connect the gallery's three rooms. T-shirts are laundered in a washing machine, and the "gray water" is then filtered and used to dye sea urchin shells. The candy-colored urchins are offered for sale (as are Gatorade, colored pencils and screen-printed T-shirts) in an elaborately constructed wooden storefront. Eventually, the water is pumped into a kiddie pool-turned-fountain. Some elements of Ms. Washburn's system — bits of greenery, fish tanks filled with Day-Glo golf balls — seem more decorative than functional, but it's hard to tell.

The work's scatological title (which can't be printed here) connects bodily and industrial waste. Ms. Washburn suggests that the byproducts of art making must also be dealt with, and that resourceful artists can find ways to benefit from this new economy.

KAREN ROSENBERG

NEW YORK



Phoebe Washburn's *While Enhancing a Diminishing Deep Down Thirst, the Juice Broke Loose (the Birth of a Soda Shop)* (2008), at the Whitney.

ART

When Cool Turns Cold The Whitney Biennial, chockablock with bloodless M.F.A. product, is a little too smart for its own good.

BY JERRY SALTZ

AT THE WHITNEY, 2008 is the year of the Art School Biennial. Not because the art in the new Biennial is immature or because the artists all went to art school—although I bet they did—but because it centers on a very narrow slice of highly educated artistic activity and features a lot of very thought-out, extremely self-conscious, carefully pieced-together installations, sculpture, and earnestly political art. These works often resemble architectural fragments, customized found objects, ersatz modernist monuments, Home Depot displays, graphic design, or magazine layouts, and the resultant assemblage—college aesthetic, while compelling in the hands of some, is completely beholden to ideas taught in hip academies. It's the style du jour right now. (It also promises to become really annoying in the not too distant future, but that's another column.)

THE WHITNEY
BIENNIAL
THE WHITNEY MUSEUM
OF AMERICAN ART
THROUGH JUNE 1.

Saltz, Jerry. "When Cool Turns Cold." *New York Magazine* 24 March 2008: 69-70.

Perhaps the show is so inclined toward the current art-school moment because its curators, Henriette Huldish, 36, and Shamim M. Momin, 34, were in part selected for their youth. I was thrilled that the Whitney was prepared to give itself over to young curators. No sooner had they been named, however, than Whitney director Adam Weinberg pulled back the reins, announcing that the two would be "overseen" by the museum's chief curator, Donna De Salvo, and that they'd "worked with" the advisers Thelma Golden, Bill Horrigan, and Linda Norden. If you're going to entrust young curators with your signature show, you ought to give them enough rope to do it. (Plus enough time: Huldish and Momin had all of thirteen months to pull this show together.)

But never mind the institutional politics. Like many young curators, Huldish and Momin are more cerebral than they are visual, and this show feels very, very controlled. The art and its presentation are orderly and methodical. Viewed over time and on repeated visits, the works develop interesting interrelated cross-conversations. But the circumspectness and consistency mean there are few moments that stop you in your tracks, confuse, delight, set your nerves on end, or provide moments of "What is this?" There's little that's overtly sexual, shocking, angry, colorful, traditionally beautiful or decorative, almost no madness or chaos. The show doesn't alchemically add up to more than the sum of its parts.

Huldish and Momin assert that current art is exploring what Samuel Beckett called "lessness," and that it's in a "do-over" phase. Huldish writes that artists are working in modes of "anti-spectacle" and "ephemerality," and employing "modest, found, or scavenged materials." Momin adds that the do-over "creates an unfixed arena of past possibilities," and that artists "think viral, act viral." I'm not sure what that means, but it may be her curatorspeak way of saying that artists are working together and off one another, and that they're making use of the open-source systems, self-replicating strategies, and decentralized networks of our YouTube-MySpace world. These things are changing the look of art, and of cattle calls like the Biennial.

Or they're starting to, anyway. It's clear the curators only have eyes for installation, sculpture, and video. There are 81 artists in this show, only seven of them painters by my count. Four of them—Olivier Mosset, Robert Bechtle, Mary Heilmann, and Karen Kilimnik—have been lauded for years. The youngest painter, Joe Bradley, 32, contributes three works that are boring, puckered versions of Ellsworth Kelly. These curators seem to think that painting is in-

MARCH 24, 2008 | NEW YORK 69

capable of addressing the issues of our time or that it's passé. I suspect Momin and Huldisch didn't want to include painting at all. Although that kind of academic orthodoxy is moth-eaten—a medium has potential until the ideas it addresses are exhausted—it's a shame they didn't go all the way with that notion. A No Paintings Biennial would've at least made everyone hysterical.

On the upside, Momin and Huldisch should be congratulated for mounting a thoughtful show that, while academic, is neither dogmatic (painting/photography dis notwithstanding) nor sprawling (recent biennials have been crammed with over 100 artists) nor sexist (about 40 percent of the artists are women, which may be a Biennial record). Critics have already called this show both pro-market and anti-market. It's neither, and it takes the position that most artists take: The market isn't the point.

Given that the consistency of the show means that the art tends to blend together, the things that stand out do so because of qualities like color, scale, or outright oddness, rather than for their preapproved art-world signifiers. For me a striking moment came in Mika Rottenberg's dilapidated installation that looks like a beaver dam or wooden shack. Inside, video images depict women with fetishistically long hair (one is reportedly a porn star who does nothing but wave her hair at men; who knew?). These women reach into the earth, milk goats, and make cheese. Rottenberg's palette, sound, materials, and timing combine

to make something like an animal language of images. You don't know whether to think about grooming, barnyards, the means of production, or mythic beings' doing bizarre things. This lets you escape the

art-world conventionality of so much of the show. Phoebe Washburn takes a similar chance in her sprawling sculpture/termite tower/greenhouse. It has its own irrigation system of Gatorade pumped into aquariums that grow flowers in tanks of golf balls. Like Rottenberg's, Washburn's art throws viewers "don't ask" visual curveballs.

This kind of caught-napping relish dawned on me in front of Cheney Thompson's almost-monochromes that are meticulously painted patterns that are themselves hard to identify. It's a welcome change to be lowered into the trapdoors of perception this way. Those doors crack open as well in Jedediah Caesar's Larry Bell-meets-

Donald Judd-meets-Lynda Benglis block of iridescent Styrofoam—another work with an unpredictable surface and hard-to-determine reasoning.

That kind of engaging strangeness is at work in the best films and videos on view. It becomes tragic in Omer Fast's outstanding dual-screened projection of an American soldier recounting stories of dating a German girl and his accidental killing of an Iraqi civilian. We see the relationship and the shooting reenacted on separate screens, blending together. A death has rarely seemed more pointless; the end of empire, so sad. This sadness turns outlaw

in Natalia Almada's *Al Otro Lado (To the Other Side)*, a stunning 66-minute work documenting the Mexican music known as *corrido*, a style that has gone from telling stories of troubadours to recounting tales of drug-runners and "coyotes"; as one musician bitterly sings, "I didn't cross the border; the border crossed me." A subtler rupture permeates Amie Siegel's excellent exploration of the former East Germany.

The three most effective films in the show are the craziest. In them you sense humanity tugging on the bit, mired in uncontrolled emotions. These are Coco Fusco's indoctrination into the interrogation techniques of the U.S. military; Olaf Breuning's treatise on hapless American ecotourism; and Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's wild woman walking around L.A. with Viking horns on her head and a hunk of fake cheese under her arm.

The best chance viewers have of escaping the art-school gravity is to see the show in reverse. Start by visiting the performances and installations at the glorious Armory on Park Avenue. And go at night (the place is pretty empty during the day). It's possible that the looser and more experimental atmosphere, the hanging out, the free tequila, and the amazing architecture will give your experience a boost. So far, among others, I've seen outstanding performances by the legendary "loser" Michael Smith in which he dressed in a baby diaper and interacted with audience members, Gang Gang Dance playing a twenty-minute set of tribalistic trance music from behind a huge mirror, and, best of all, Marina Rosenfeld's *Teenage Lontano*, in which she had 40 teenagers from New York public schools stand in a long line as they sang the vocal section of György Ligeti's 1967 *Lontano*, a piece of modernist music from the *2001: A Space Odyssey* era. Watching this piece, I felt the opening of a portal between a failed utopian past and the possibility that the more real present is already something to love. I was transported.

This show comes at a restless, discontented moment. Institutional critique has become an institutional style, and the socio-artistic movement known as "relational aesthetics"—that is, art that's all about your own relationship to being in public with it—has gone mainstream. Most in the art world want more than that. They're longing for art to be more than just a commodity or a comment on art history. They yearn for a less quantifiable, more vulnerable essence, perhaps what Lawrence Weiner called, "the eternal little surprise of *Well, is it art?*" I still have faith in Momin and Huldisch, but while some of the art in their biennial has this essence, much of it simply looks like what art looks like these days. ■

BACKSTORY

It should come as no surprise that this Biennial's bright young curators come with sparkling academic CVs.

Henriette Huldisch did her first master's in American Studies at Humboldt University, and another in cinema at NYU. Shamim Momin studied art history at Williams, and did Ph.D. work at CUNY. But don't accuse them of being square.

Huldisch oversaw last year's *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era*, a show heavy on album covers and light on substance that was a critical flop and an audience hit.

Momin's last exhibition was the much-buzzed-about Terence Koh show, an almost

empty installation flooded with superbright light.



Mika Rottenberg's *Cheese (2007-2008)*.



Phoebe Washburn: Tickle the Shitstem



Installation view

★★★★★

Zach Feuer Gallery, through Oct 4
(see Chelsea)

With attractive international interns operating a store and reggae resounding through the gallery, it's easy to dismiss Phoebe Washburn's show as a hipster event. Yet this Poughkeepsie, NY, native, who was in the 2008 Whitney Biennial, has a lot more to offer than just good times for sale.

Washburn's multi-part installation, with its naughty, scatological title, is a quirky cross between a child prodigy's science fair booth and a DIY project gone wrong. Its centerpiece is a washing machine in which used T-shirts are rinsed daily before being branded with the word *OKT* and sold for \$25 each. The water used in this process is then slowly purified through a series of vats and tanks. The end result eventually fills a massive barrel, which is emptied by the intern on duty.

Washburn's "rules of the game" stipulate that the excess water needs to be creatively reused. Plants are hydrated; sea urchins, T-shirts and pencils are dyed and sold; soda is peddled so that the bottles might be recycled to hold more water. It's a never-ending battle to keep the system functioning as production and consumption, usable material and waste, become outlandishly interchangeable. With supply exceeding demand, defeat seems inevitable, and the remainder of each day's water is transported to a plastic kiddie pool where it ungracefully stagnates. Washburn's show is a powerful demonstration about the fragility of our natural resources, which, when intertwined with human needs and desires, are placed in grave jeopardy.

—*Nuit Banai*

The New York Times

Burgeoning Geometries

Constructed Abstractions

*Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria
120 Park Avenue, at 42nd Street
Through March 4*

Slow is beautiful. That could be the motto of the six artists (Diana Cooper, Tara Donovan, Charles Goldman, Jason Rogenes, Jane South and Phoebe Washburn) in this spirited, if uneven, show organized by Apsara DiQuinzio, a curatorial associate at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. All favor a time-intensive, process-oriented approach in 10 hybrid works — 11, counting Mr. Goldman's MySpace page, cited on the checklist — that traverse painting, drawing, sculpture and installation.

The unifying thread is a kind of magpie postminimalism, which invigorates familiar abstract strategies — grids, serial repetition, reductive forms — using materials scavenged from everyday life. A short list includes woodchips, oil drums, straight pins, electrical cords and live snails. The best works rely on recycled ingredients, Dumpster-diving their way to a sustainable art.

The Whitney's Altria branch, a modest gallery and a sprawling public atrium, is an architectural Jekyll and Hyde. The maniacal side wins out here in a pair of visionary large-scale installations by Mr. Rogenes and Ms. Washburn that bookend the sculpture court. (An underwhelming selection of bucket-based objects by Mr. Goldman is also displayed.)

An ingenious composite of Brancusi's "Endless Column," Dan Flavin's fluorescence, and pyramid power, Mr. Rogenes's 40-foot-high construction pairs an illuminated totem pole of found polystyrene packaging with a cardboard construction that recalls the modular polygons of Buckminster Fuller. Ms. Washburn's ambitious structure, modestly titled "A Minor In-House Brain Storm," is a winningly ramshackle, self-con-

tained ecosystem, complete with aquatic plants (and the snails).

By contrast, the sparse trio of works inside the gallery looks staid. Ms. Donovan's shimmering cube of straight pins lacks menace, and Ms. South's verdigris-colored cut-and-folded paper relief appears diagrammatic. Only Ms. Cooper's wall-work — a viral concoction of vinyl, paper, felt and ink — surprises as it sprouts from itself around a column like a cartoon spore. **ANDREA K. SCOTT**

Art in America

Phoebe Washburn at LFL

Phoebe Washburn creates low-tech, room-size sculptures made up of a great many units of slightly varying appearance. Her rippling structures appear to be arrived at by chance but also rely on some tricky engineering. For her second New York solo, she offered *Nothing's Cutie* (2004), a mixed-medium work chiefly built up of vertically massed strips of wood often painted light pink, yellow, green, blue or orange.

Upon entering the gallery, visitors had the option to pass under one side of the structure. From this vantage point, much of the technique that went into the work was in evidence. Surprisingly, only a small percentage of the slender elements reached down to the floor, while the majority of the tightly bolted-together slats and planks held each other in place in midair. Entire clusters of painted wood strips were raised off the ground by a pair of precariously positioned folding tables.

Eventually, viewers could discover that most of the structure, some of which reached almost to the ceiling, was anchored to the two piers in the main space of the gallery.

On the other side of the moderately dark and treacherous passageway underneath the sculpture, which featured simulacra of stalactites and makeshift implements left in plain sight, came a light-filled area—above ground, as it were. Here, the construction turned into steep, hilariously faceted hillsides and valleys punctuated with abstracted buildings. The effect was reminiscent of the haphazardly arranged, pastel colored houses that fill one's field of vision when driving into San Francisco from the south.

The illusion Washburn obtains through the abstract geometric means of painted wood slats, she also disrupts by incorporating into her sculpture large rolls of tape and containers filled with screws. In addition, pencils are wedged upright between bundles of slats. Two small fields of sawdust in the middle of the piece establish sandy beaches of sorts.

Animated by Washburn's free-wheeling virtuosity and dreamy sense of play, this space-engulfing sculpture seemed arbitrarily contained by the walls of the gallery. Theoretically, it could have gone on and on.

—Michaël Amy

Phoebe Washburn: *Nothing's Cutie*, 2004, painted wood, pencils, sawdust, nails, chairs, tables and mixed mediums; at LFL.





Phoebe Washburn, *Nothing's Cutie*, 2004, mixed media, dimensions variable.

PHOEBE WASHBURN

LFL GALLERY

Phoebe Washburn's undulating, room-sized sculptural installation, *Nothing's Cutie*, 2004, looks at first like a colorful topographic model of a densely populated futuristic urban metropolis plunked down on a desert island: Rio meets Las Vegas meets Cancun, or maybe Kuala Lumpur. Hundreds of vertically inclined wooden planks of different lengths and dimensions, each briskly handpainted a pastel hue, have been screwed together, forming clusters (or neighborhoods) that open into little clearings of sawdust. Daintily punctuated with unsharpened pencils, packing tape, thumbtacks, and other stuff procured from office-supply stores, the installation stands on stilts and creeps up to the gallery's removed ceiling.

Like the Minimalist sculpture to which it alludes, the work provokes a particular kind of encounter with the viewer: It is both static object and unfolding environment. *Nothing's Cutie* involves ready-made materials—found, scavenged, and store-bought—but (unlike much of Minimalism) is massively, even obsessively, intricate. It is literal and, with its profusion of two-by-fours, in some ways geometrically based, but it is anything but inert: Pulsating, organic, and improvisational, it combines a whooshing painterly gestural-ity with blocky, quasi-institutional forms.

Washburn's installation bears the unusual

distinction of connecting the otherwise obverse practices of Jessica Stockholder and Sarah Sze. As with Stockholder there's an everything-including-the-kitchen-sink quality to Washburn's work—*Nothing's Cutie* contains an apparently incidental box of screws that might have been left over from a recent gallery reconstruction—but each component seems carefully placed. Her use of construction materials, the way the work occupies the gallery's corners, and especially the element of color seem indebted to Sze, though, title aside, there's nothing particularly precious or “cute” about Washburn's much heavier-feeling sculpture. And yet the topographical sensibility in Washburn's practice, the way it seems to push and pull space, points to affinities with painting and drawing: Julie Mehretu's colorful, organic, but somehow cartographic work comes to mind. Even though Washburn's colors (of the Benjamin Moore interior type) seem hastily, almost serially added, they enliven the work and add dimension, calling attention to *this* piece of wood, *that* pool of sawdust.

In other recent exhibitions Washburn has demonstrated a fascination with reusable materials—her *Second to Something* installation at P.S. 1 this summer was a wooden ramplike structure paired with found newspaper formed into organic, cell-like shapes, displayed along with shipping crates and custom-made cardboard boxes. And for *Between Sweet and Low* at LFL in 2002, she created a giant whirlpool—colored an institutional light brown with sections in pink, green, and other pastel tints—made from thousands of flattened cardboard boxes. But her attachment to the recycling ethos (*pace* some still-practicing

“Earth artists”) seems less ideological critique and more simply a response to the mundane reality of life as a city-dwelling artist. Hers is the kind of material you might find behind a U-Haul lot or artist-supply store, or on a building site awaiting a permit. The rudimentary architectural structures that she fashions from those materials may not have much street cred, but in their own way they are undeniably a product of the streets.

—Nico Israel

ARTFORUM

PICKS

New York
CRITICS' PICKS

Phoebe Washburn/Simone Shubuck

LFL GALLERY

530 W24th St

September 02–October 02

The recently expanded LFL has taken advantage of its extra space with a gallery-filling installation by Phoebe Washburn, who uses scavenged or recycled materials to make large-scale constructions that seem to take shape according to some organic logic of their own. Here she's outdone herself with a promontory of vertically aligned, pastel-painted wood scraps, held together with drywall screws and punctuated by pencils, empty Staples boxes, rolls of masking tape, and debris-strewn sand traps. With its antic yet imposing presence and implicit ecological ethos, the piece situates itself in the genealogy of environmental art by way of the crazed-Dumpster-diver sensibility of Jason Rhoades. In the gallery's back room, Simone Shubuck's solo debut features delicate mixed-media drawings whose flattened, obsessive compositions recall Adolf Wölfli's. Shubuck's *recherché* references—to Peter Beard, Egon Schiele, and *Method and Red*, among other things—bring a cultural insider's perspective to the visual conventions of "outsider" art.

—Elizabeth Schambelan



Phoebe Washburn, *Nothing's Cutie*, 2004. Installation view.



THE NEW YORKER

SEPTEMBER 13, 2004

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—**Phoebe Washburn's** sprawling installations are composed of scavenged wood, newsprint, cardboard, and other materials, color-coded with hardware-store mis-tints (the custom-mixed paint colors rejected by customers as not quite right) and arranged into enormous topographies of piled, layered, and otherwise concatenated junk. Washburn's garbage-picking engenders surprisingly delicate sculpture; the work hovers between organized spatial elegance and just-dump-it-all trashiness. Through Sept. 26. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)