ART REVIEW | BRUCENNIAL 2010

Who Needs the Whitney? They Have Their Own Show

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If the 2010 Whitney Biennial is too lean, clean and demure for your taste, you might try an alternative, the Brucennial in SoHo, which features 420 artists from 91 countries working in 666 disciplines, and is, for good measure, the most important survey of contemporary art in the world. Ever.

Well, that’s what the news release says. And there really is a ton of art shoehorned into the Brucennial’s 5,000-square-foot street-level quarters on West Broadway. The show is the brainchild of the Bruce High Quality Foundation, a five-artist collective focused on reshaping the art world as we know it by placing some of its more conspicuous functions, like education and the organizing of exhibitions, into artists’ hands.

Making such change doesn’t require, as you once assumed it did, staying clear of the art mainstream. Just the opposite: the collective is happy to show in commercial galleries, and it contributes a major piece to this year’s Whitney Biennial. Nowadays change means doing what the mainstream does, but doing it differently.

The Brucennial, in its third year and at its first Manhattan site, is by this point well established, but it claims no permanent home. (The SoHo space, which extends over two floors, is on short-term loan from an art collector and real estate titan, Aby Rosen.) And in almost every way the show remains, by design, a pick-up affair.

If the selection process for the Whitney Biennial is super-
discussion.

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stringent, getting into the Brucennial is a breeze. To be sure, there is an invitation list: the collective asks some favorite artists, as does the young dealer Vito Schnabel, son of Julian, who is the official handler of this year's edition.

Mostly, though, word just gets out, and people turn up with their work.

The democratic spirit is also reflected in the messy, larky, charged-up look of the show. The installation feels less organized than artfully disorganized. The walls are hung salon-style and filled top to bottom. I was there during the helter-skelter set-up, and saw how it worked. If a new painting arrived, and it was big, a bunch of small ones already up got rearranged, no muss, no fuss. But neither size nor quality guaranteed advantageous positioning. Nor, for the most part, did celebrity, of which there are many representatives in this supposedly nonestablishment (if not anti-establishment) show.

Among celebrated artists with work on the walls, I noted David Salle, Francesco Clemente, Ron Gorchov, George Condo, Donald Baechler, James Nares, and, unsurprisingly, Julian Schnabel. That they were interspersed with younger colleagues was nice, but that they were there at all was a surprise. Purely in terms of star power, the Brucennial puts the 2010 Whitney show in the shade, making its roster look like a list of strivers still outside the blue-chip loop.

So where does the Bruce High Quality Foundation stand in relation to that loop? That may be the big Brucennial question. The word these days is that it's impossible for artists to take an effective critical position outside the socioeconomic system called the art world. The system is all-encompassing. It absorbs all resistance. The very notion of alternative anything is a romantic illusion.

This means that if your defining goal is to change that system — open it up, tangle its wiring, expose its codes — you have to work from within: but really work, take what you find and seriously do something to it to make it your own. On paper, the 2010 Brucennial, which is subtitled “Miseducation,” seemed poised to do that, but it doesn’t. It’s fun, it’s cool, it has some good stuff, but it felt, at least in preview, like the average Bring-Your-Own-Art bash crossed with a Whitney Biennial of, say, 25 years ago.

Still, these Bruce High Quality people are smart. Their hearts and brains are in the right place. I'm counting on them to rethink (again) the whole positioning thing and do the 2011 Brucennial in — to quote the show’s Web site (www.brucennial.com) — a harder, better, stronger way. No joke.

“The Brucennial 2010: Miseducation” runs through April 4 at 350 West Broadway, between Broome and Grand Streets, SoHo, with projects also on view at Recess at 41 Grand Street.