

February 9, 2012

'Looking Back/The 6th White Columns Annual — Selected by Ken Okiishi and Nick Mauss'

By ROBERTA SMITH

*White Columns**320 West 13th Street (entrance on Horatio Street)**West Village**Through Feb. 18*

Ardently feminist, willfully obscure and focused on a rather limited gene pool of the young and the hip, the sixth incarnation of the [White Columns Annual](#) may be the most idiosyncratic version yet of this indispensable year-end review. If the exhibition's mission is to present an alternative view of the preceding year in and around New York's galleries, it has been fulfilled here with a vengeance. Organized by the artists Ken Okiishi and Nick Mauss, it often features artworks and events that even the most inveterate art pursuers may have missed.

These include a painting by Alex Kwartler that was exhibited only in his studio; a video compilation made with Loretta Fahrenholz of improvisational performances staged over 13 days last summer at the Museum of Modern Art by the artist collective Grand Openings; and numerous small, touching but generally inconsequential works from "Transeuphoria," an exhibition featuring transgendered artists at Umbrella Arts Gallery, an under-the-radar East Village outpost for outsider art.

Female artists are greatly in the majority among these selections, which include works by the nonagenarian Austrian painter Maria Lassnig, the Conceptual pioneer Adrian Piper, the Pictures artists Sherrie Levine and Louise Lawler, and the Abstract Expressionist Joan Mitchell (1925-92). The desire to feature women is admirable, but some are becoming usual suspects in their own right, making their inclusion feel obligatory.

Maleness is hilariously accounted for by Antoine Catala's installation "HDDH," in which two

functioning television monitors are connected by a sturdy, noticeably phallic mirrored cylinder that creates all sorts of gleaming, cartoony distortions. (The piece appeared in “Perfect Man II,” a group show at White Columns last fall.) Among other highlights, a series of photographs made by Margaret Lee in collaboration with a dozen artists (one at a time) says something about both the persistence and flexibility of aesthetic sensibility (and the photography itself).

The show’s indisputable star is a densely worked 37-foot-long mural on paper by the German artist Michaela Eichwald, seen at Reena Spaulings Fine Art last year. Its smoky mix of chemicals and images (including several works by the German painter Sigmar Polke) creates a slipping, sliding technically mysterious miasma that suggests a kind of urban cave painting.

Also good: watching the slide show of Alvin Baltrop’s haunted photographs of gay life on the West Side piers — a revelation when they were shown at Third Streaming — while listening to the sweet, reedy singing of Emily Sundblad (an artist who is also a force behind Reena Spaulings Fine Arts), heard on video in performance at the Albus Greenspon Gallery. It blends two separate events into something new and memorable.