

the village

VOICE

America in the Spotlight (and the Crosshairs) at the Whitney

A FOREIGN AFFAIR

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BY KIM LEVIN

THE AMERICAN EFFECT

Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue
Through October 12

"This show doesn't suck," commented a fellow art writer with a smile of satisfaction on her face, as I stepped out of the elevator into "The American Effect." Call that an understatement. The Whitney Museum of American Art has strategically transcended its mandate to show only American art, and has done so in a tough, serious, funny, intelligent, biting, sometimes startling, and absolutely relevant exhibition that lets us see our nation as others see us. This isn't just an important exhibition. At a moment when Uncle Sam seems to be morphing into Godzilla, it's a necessary one.

In this summer of disbelief, it's the perfect antidote to conjured uranium and missing WMDs. Well, maybe not the perfect antidote. But while we're wondering where our constitutional principles and institutional balances of power went, it's instructive to read—in a newspaper installation by Durban-born Siemon Allen—that South Africans are in stitches over *Survivor*. It's satisfying to see, in a chromogenic color print from a series called *My Grandmothers* by Miwa Yanagi from Kyoto, an exhilarating update on the dream of our country as the land of opportunity and eternal youth. A fantasy of unlimited freedom, glamour, and self-delusion, it's this exhibition's quintessential image.