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Whitney Museum curator Shamim Momin with artist Dash Snow at the 2006 Whitney Biennial  
Photo by Mary Barone

## EYE CANDY V. HARD CANDY by Julia Morton

*Under modernism the appreciation, even more than the making, of [art] has become more taxing.*  
-- Clement Greenberg

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One imagines that Whitney Museum founder Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney would have stopped to listen as Shamim Momin, the chic and sharp-eyed associate curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, stepped up to the lectern at the New York Studio School, the speaker at the school's weekly lecture series on Oct. 10, 2007. Momin pulled her silver-ringed fingers back through her long dark hair and, speaking with the subtle lilt of a valley girl, plunged the audience deep into art theory.

If you had come for a slide show of eye candy or hints at who might be in the 2008 Whitney Biennial -- of which Shamim is a curator -- forget about it. Among the art-world hard core, eye candy is now hard candy. And having sworn the museum's sacred oath of silence, Momin was not willing to talk about the biennial. The evening's topic was, rather, a new book project she has coming out, titled *The Impossibility of Translation*.

While visiting hundreds of artist's studios in preparation for the Whitney Biennial, Momin said, she was struck at the impossibility of her task, which is essentially to define and present the most important new directions in contemporary


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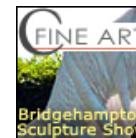
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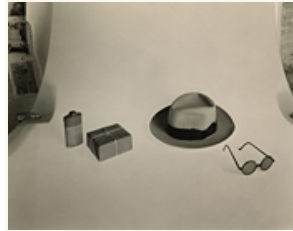
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Justin Beal, thesis show  
installation view, 2007  
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**Walead Beshty**  
*Still Life in the Observatory*  
(*Perspective / Composition*  
*Study after Le Corbusier, villa*  
*Savoie at Poissy, toit-jardin*  
*looking southwest, "gray hat,*  
*sunglasses and two*  
*indeterminate objects," 1931)*  
2005  
Wallspace Gallery



**Shannon Ebner**  
*The Crooked Sign*  
2006  
Wallspace Gallery



**Yoshua Okon**  
*Parking Lotus*  
n.d.  
Cerealart, Philadelphia



art. No matter what you chose, things get left out and meaning is ripped out of context and altered. When the book was proposed, Momin grabbed the chance to explore this thesis in print.

Momin paused to remember that Gertrude worked in the Studio School building, which was home to the first Whitney Museum. Today, Whitney's own art collection is gathering dust in the museum basement (so to speak), 95 percent of it in storage. The museum's Marcel Breuer building, in all its 80,000 square feet of Brutalist glory, is now considered insufficiently spacious, and the Whitney plans a vaunting new structure in Chelsea. "Change" Momin says, "can be a good thing." Indeed. Her own bailiwick, the branch museum in the lobby of the Altria building on East 42nd Street, is not long for this world [see "*Undone at Altria*," Oct. 31, 2007].

Momin prodded the audience in a diplomatic fashion as she clicked through her slides. Had we all felt the shift toward literary conceptualism? Silence. Had we read Jorge Luis Borges, the well-known Argentinean author? More silence. Had we read Clement Greenberg's critiques or Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy? And, did we shop at Home Depot? She forgave us our ignorance of Home Depot. "After all," she said, "this isn't L.A., it's New York."

A couple walked out after she began talking about Greenberg. An act of protest at the Stalin Era formalism? The unseasonably hot night? Or the impossibility of following Momin's complex ideas?

Momin admitted she likes defining things, and enjoys what Borges described as "a kind of lazy pleasure in useless and out-of-the-way erudition." She mentioned specifically Borges' reflections on the nature of translations and time, Greenberg's art for art's sake esthetics, and Wittgenstein's philosophy of languages as especially relevant to the artists in her book.

One text in a series edited by artist Olga Adelantado and titled "Six Impossible Things before Breakfast" (Centro Montehermoso), Momin's book discusses the work of ten artists: Tauba Auerbach, Justin Beal, Walead Beshty, Monica Bonvicini, Sue DeBeer, Shannon Ebner, Matias Faldbakken, Yoshua Okon, Mungo Thompson and Andrea Zittel. Hmmm. We'll check this list against the lineup of biennial artists later.

Over the past two years, Momin said, she had been struck by the number of artists working on thresholds, boundaries and edges, and the liminal space in between. Her book's projects include x-ray-damaged surveillance photographs, comic-book drawings, images of testosterone, fauxness, essays and footnotes, and the "paradox of the attempt," an essay based on the childhood game of Post Office.

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**Mungo Thomson**  
*Folk Jam*  
2004  
Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles

"Seemingly seamless," Momin said, glancing up from her notes to smile at the audience of artists, students and other "interested parties," as Gertrude called her salon guests. Momin's move to shore up conceptualism is pitched as a challenge to the make-a-buck market by raising esthetic standards to a level not casually attained. To feel Borges' slippage, or grasp Wittgenstein's subliminal, you need more than the quick read of a press release. To counteract the supposedly numbing effects of easy art, she said, these children of postmodernism, who were encouraged to free themselves of all restraints, now search for rules and boundaries.

Art theory requires a commitment that's not for everybody, and perhaps that's the idea. Academics keep their grip on esthetics by making their slippery work sound smart. With Momin as translator and curator, contemporary conceptualism, such as it is, has a young champion. After all, the Whitney opens a survey of the work of ur-conceptualist Lawrence Weiner this week, Nov. 15, 2007-Feb. 10, 2008.

**JULIA MORTON** is a New York-based curator and writer on the visual arts. Her first book, *Amalgam: Kent Williams*, was published in 2006.

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