



ALEX BROOK LYNN

ON SHOW

# Does Donald Trump Make for Good Art?

The Whitney Museum’s Biennial show unsurprisingly finds artists exercised by current political events, and America’s divisive commander-in-chief.



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For those who refuse to believe that art is, by nature, always political--must it *always* have an agenda?--the Whitney Museum’s 2017 Biennial just might convert you.

There is little subtext on display at this year's exhibition, the first Biennial in the museum's new, vast home in downtown Manhattan; the art is emphatically, nakedly political--unsurprisingly so, given our turbulent times.

In press materials, the Biennial bills itself as "the most important survey of the state of contemporary art in the United States," one that is meant to reflect our current cultural climate. Even before visitors see much of the work, one of the wall text informs them that this year's Biennial is, as ever, "an opportunity for deep thinking and reflection on the cultural concerns of a given historical moment."

Currently, that moment is "rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics."

Trump's name appears only twice in the exhibition, which features works by 63 artists (half of them women and people of color), but the president's rhetoric is always looming.



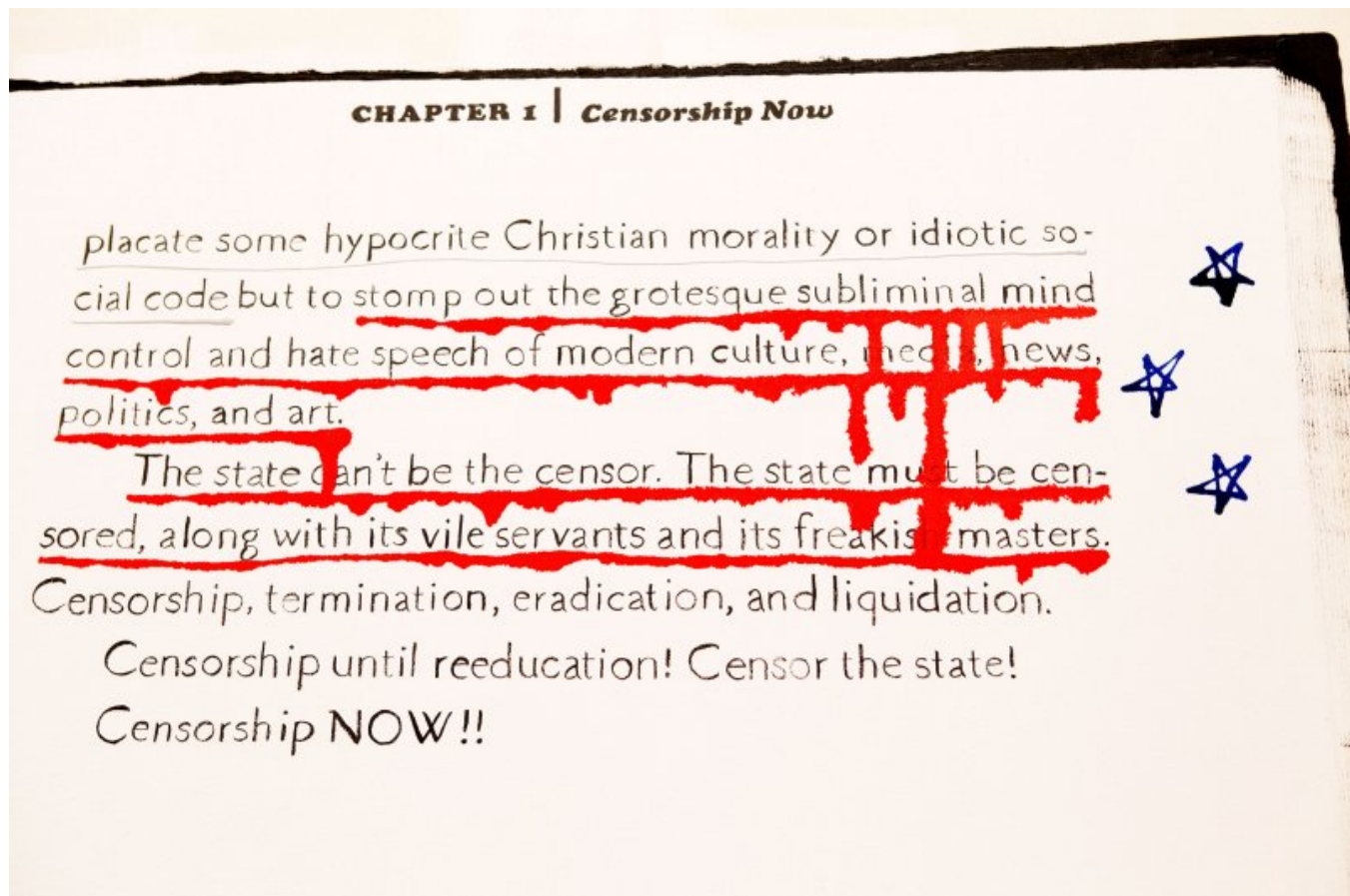
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It is there in painter Dana Schutz's enormous *Elevator*: a giant hand near the top right of the canvas, rising out of an almost Cubist tangle of limbs, faces, and insects, evokes



allegations of groping and other sexual misconduct by Trump.

Likewise in Frances Stark's large text paintings--reproductions of Ian Svenonius' 2017 book *Censorship Now*, which makes a totalitarian case for censorship of media, television, art, and politicians. Some parts of the text have been underlined by Stark in gray ("If we believe that rock n roll demolished the USSR and communism...then don't we believe it could demolish capitalism, a system wrought by even more contradictions, global discontent, and insane inequality?") and dripping red paint ("Art is a lost state now. It's a mess, without any ideas of why it exists, where it's going, who it's for, and where it comes from.") Svenonius's book is a leftist, anti-capitalist rant, but its calls for censorship feel eerily timely.



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When I saw the exhibition earlier this week during a members-only preview, everyone was talking about Jordan Wolfson's gruesomely violent, 90-second VR video that shows the artist brutally beating another man with a baseball bat, then smashing his face in with his boot.

This, too, could be viewed as an oblique reference to Trump’s campaign rhetoric, or as a commentary on how pervasive violence is in our culture.

The violent act occurs on the sidewalk in broad daylight, yet no one intervenes. Viewers can look away even with a VR headset on, but they’ll be tempted by sound effects to watch Wolfson's bloody show. This will likely be one of the more polarizing pieces of the Biennial. For me, it was more provocation for provocation’s sake than effective commentary.

One of the more interesting themes of the exhibition is artists’ rejection of the elite art world, as seen in the collective Occupy Museum’s “Debtfair” installation, consisting of thirty different artworks: a spliced photograph of the statue of liberty overlaid with the words “wtf is America”; a photograph of what looks like a Vaseline jar is in fact a container of “P.R.O.M.E.S.A.,” which is “100% for the people, real colonial rule.”

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Thank you for subscribing to the Daily Digest and Cheat Sheet. We will not share your email with On the wall above the installation is a quote attributed to Larry Fink, Chairman and CEO of BlackRock bank, that reads, in large black letters: “The two greatest stores of wealth internationally today [are] contemporary art [...and] apartments in Manhattan.” The piece asks the art-viewing public to see how art communities have been destabilized by debt.

It is fascinating to see this tension between art and money--and artists biting the hand that feeds them--explored in galleries or museums.

Among the less political works are photographer John Divola's "Abandoned Painting" series, for which he found a trove of paintings in a dumpster near the University of California, Riverside (Divola is a professor there), hung them in abandoned buildings, and photographed them there. Divola aimed to show how photography can "transform reality rather than simply record it," according to the wall text—a simple but beautifully executed conceit.



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Of the other works that reflect issues dividing our country, Henry Taylor's depiction of Philando Castile after he was fatally shot by a Minnesota police officer last summer (the incident was recorded by his fiancé, Diamond Reynolds) is notable. We see Castile, lifeless in the back of a car, and a white hand aiming a gun at him through the backseat window.

Jon Kessler's *Exodus* and *Evolution* installations are witty commentaries on the refugee and climate crises.

After a while, all of this overt politicking might make you look for political messaging in every piece on display rather than appreciating the aesthetics. Visitors would do well to keep this in mind, since there is a lot of visually wonderful work on display. It's not easy to create an exhibition that is both aesthetically beautiful and politically charged, but the Biennial's co-curators have pulled it off--and the show is a rousing success.

The 2017 Whitney Biennial *runs until June 11. [More details here.](#)*

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