

# Commentary: The Whitney's Biennial Is a Barometer of Art in America

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*By A. E. Colas, Contributing Writer, March 17, 2017*

The latest incarnation of the Whitney Biennial takes as its starting point the divisions of culture, finance and social issues: in short, the current climate in America. The views expressed are, for the most part, liberal or provocative in nature, while the design and layout of this show is not especially innovative or ground breaking. However, in many cases, the subject matter and method chosen to discuss it are as good as anything you could hope to see. In a gallery setting that would be enough. In a large museum and an exhibit with a loose definition, it becomes dissatisfying. The visitor goes from thought to thought, ping-ponging their way across the displays, never really learning much of anything.

Perhaps that is the way the modern art aficionado works today. Speed and visual appeal are of the essence: trying to divine a message, any message, takes time and people are not willing to do that. Every one of these works took effort and time to plan out and create, but viewing takes no time at all. This method tends to take the joy out of anything, and if there is no joy, then why are you looking at it?

You're looking at it because it's still interesting. The curators of the current Biennial, Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, have brought together a variety of ages and experiences to this event and the results are surprisingly consistent. There is heavy-handed symbolism, big picture political commentary, small picture political commentary, irony, faux irony, make of it what you will objects, and some old-fashioned but still effective statements. And then there is tucked away in a side area some joyful, even playful abstractions.

Case in point: Frances Stark's painting series, *Censorship Now* is a group of large canvases with hand painted text from a book by Ian F. Svenonius. His writings declare that by creating irrelevant art, artists have self-censored themselves, and to regain their freedom of speech and expression, they should engage in censorship practices to eliminate bland, useless work. The images call to mind an annotated textbook passed from student to student, each finding meaning in different paragraphs (and possibly thinking of the final exam when the reading must be repurposed into a passing grade). The language is deliberately provoking but hardly a new manifesto. One can imagine students dutifully parroting the line of the author or teacher: pro or con, it's all for the grade point.

Henry Taylor's paintings take a figurative approach. His large canvases showing the African American community command the viewer to pay attention to the social issues that are at the heart of daily life for so many. Aliza Nisenbaum is also interested in the individual: in her work the undocumented immigrant living in the US is shown with a compassionate and caring eye. Dana Schutz's *Elevator*, painted on a canvas that matches the dimensions of the Whitney's own freight elevator, gives a frantic energy that is rarely seen in current figural works. Shara Hughes' landscapes are vivid and even a little jarring in their neutrality in this relentlessly political show.

Deana Lawson has a similar focus to Taylor's with her photographs of subjects and their interior spaces although the staginess of the images can be distracting. What is not distracting is the direct gaze of the many subjects who are concentrating their whole being into the camera lens and out into the Whitney. It is a welcome touch of humanity.

Other photographers such as John Divola and An-My Lê take their cameras out into the world, documenting and/or staging images of environmental or urban decay, with or without human intervention. The balance and structure of the images creates a harmonic frame to look at a slowly disintegrating world. Sky Hopinka's fifteen minute video titled *Visions of an Island* takes a viewer through the landscape of St. Paul Island in the Bering Sea, providing a soundtrack with members of the local Aleut population speaking the language that once was their people's only method of communication. The loss of language as a destruction of identity is a classic conquering technique and a reminder of all those throughout time who have suffered such a fate.

True abstract pieces are represented as well. The exuberance of Carrie Moyer's work is a welcome relief from the earnest lecturing of the rest of the show. A small corridor on the fifth floor shows a series by Ulrike Müller refreshing in its simplicity. The blankness of Matt Browning's sculpture is disconcerting – he gives nothing to the viewer even though his pieces show traces of his labor.

Some works on display seem designed exclusively for the smartphone. That is, you don't see it in person; you see it through a small screen because that looks better. John Riepenhoff's collaborations with various artists are just familiar enough to take a picture, say how clever and move on. The same goes for Jon Kessler's pieces *Exodus* and *Evolution*, both savvy exploitations of the spectator's attention span.

Display is an important part of any Biennial. The curators have used as much space as they could reach and this forces the visitor to treat everything seen as a possible artwork. It's a great idea but some works lose something from this treatment. The banners of Cauleen Smith with their cries of despair and anger become muted because they are hung high and away from the visitor. They act as voices just out of hearing, floating up to a heaven that doesn't seem to be listening. The blank signs of Park McArthur are hanging above the admissions desks in the lobby and completely ignored as a result. If they were to be seen and acknowledged, it's doubtful anyone would know it was art. However, the second display on the sixth floor gives her work more of a chance to be understood. The curators have done better with the outside terrace areas, most likely because visitors are primed to see something within those spaces. Larry Bell's *Pacific Red II* works well in the outdoor area, the color and multiple surfaces of the piece reacting to the space and natural light.

But when the space and the work are aligned correctly the effect is outstanding. The work of Raul de Nieves is one of the few pieces that give energy and purpose to its given area. A site specific installation, it uses a large window covered with colorful panels depicting generalized human shapes engaging in activity as a backdrop for a group of mannequins covered in elaborate beading and textiles. The positioning of the figures gives the appearance of a stage set, a manipulation of the visitor's experience that is enhanced by a long line of public seating against the wall opposite. People stop, look, take a picture, and move on. And the figures and the audience remain, forever locked in their separate worlds.

The 2017 Whitney Biennial continues through June 11 at The Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street. For more information [click here](#).

*Cover: A detail from 'Elevator' (2017) by Dana Schutz; photo: ZEALnyc*