FINE ART CULTURAL CRITICISM AND ANALYSIS

Can The Pain of Others Be Transmuted into Art?

While Dana Schutz's Open Casket *has received the lion's share of attention, much of the Whitney Biennial seems to seek out controversy.*

By Barry Schwabsky

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"Open Casket" by Dana Schutz at the Whitney, March 23, 2017. *(AP Photo / Alina Heineke)*

The flu had me flat on my back the week this year's Whitney Biennial opened, so I skipped the festivities.

Yet I was more curious about it than in most years, for two reasons. First, there seemed to be more unfamiliar names on the list of artists than usual; the result could be good or bad, but at least I could feel certain that the curators, Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, had done their legwork and that, as a result, I'd see something new. The second reason was that this would be the first Biennial in the museum's new quarters at the foot of Manhattan's High Line park. So far, it's seemed to me that the Whitney's curators have had problems learning how to use the space; this would be a big test. In the days that followed, my curiosity grew as I noticed a strange disparity: The first responders among the critics were rapturously favorable (*ARTnews* headline: "The 2017 Whitney Biennial Is a Moving, Forward-Looking Tour de Force—a Triumph"), but the word of mouth among artists of my acquaintance was coming in negative.

By the time I got to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where the Biennial is on view through June 11, any thought of a disinterested curiosity about art—or about the art of curating—had been blown away. A few days after the show opened to the public, as everyone knows by now, a fierce controversy blew up over Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*, a painting based on a 1955 photograph of the battered corpse of Emmett Till, after a young British artist named Hannah Black circulated a letter calling for it to be removed, even destroyed. These days, when trolling is practiced as one of the fine arts, that last demand showed Black to be a master: The painting was not going to be destroyed, but it sure gave people something to shout about.

And shout they did, all over social media, then in the news and even on television, where the subject of art is rarely broached. There were cries of censorship and comparisons to Nazi book-burners on one side, arguments about cultural appropriation and racism on the other, and, on both sides, frequent assumptions about the other's bad faith—an assumption encapsulated by Black's accusation that Schutz was seeking "to transmute Black suffering into profit and fun."

But the underlying question surrounding the painting is a recurrent one, and worth discussing in more measured tones: Can the pain of others be transmuted into art? From Renaissance depictions of the torments undergone by Jesus and the saints through Picasso's *Guernica* and on to the present, the portrayal of victimhood has been central to Western art. But lacking the specific religious underpinnings of that tradition, or the political credos that seemed for a time to take their place, can such an artwork be more than a hideous spectacle?

As far as Schutz's intentions go, I'll admit to being biased: I consider her not only one of the best painters working today, but also a person of real integrity. Still, good artists sometimes make bad work, and people with honorable intentions sometimes commit unpardonable acts. Had Schutz gone too far by wanting to confront so directly the image of the abused body? Was it true, as Black claimed, that a white woman could not know how to do justice to this image? I'd only know when I saw the painting—and the Biennial as a whole.

Even more than past Whitney Biennials, this year's is hard to get a grip on. The layout feels mazelike. The good thing is that the rooms are mostly configured as a sequence of one- and two-person shows; you feel that you're being offered a clear view of what most of the artists are up to, rather than just a passing glimpse. A few things linger in the memory: Anicka Yi's seductive 3-D video *The Flavor Genome* (2016), about a search for sensorially stimulating chemicals in the Amazon rainforest; Tala Madani's satirical paintings of men behaving badly; John Divola's color photographs of discarded student paintings that he found and hung inside abandoned houses; and Henry Taylor's sometimes slapdash, often beautifully incisive paintings of everyday life in black America, which are mostly offbeat takes on banal scenes—for example, a portrait of a woman in pearls and a baseball cap, barbecuing—but also include the chilling scene of Philando Castile being shot in his car by a Minnesota policeman last year. And then there was Oto Gillen's video-cum-slide-show *New York* (2015–), which at first I was ready to dismiss as bland *Humans of New York*–style street portraits, until things started to take on an eerie cast and one realized how cunningly they captured the normality of life under total surveillance.

Once I'd seen the Biennial, I began to reconsider everything I thought I knew about the Schutz controversy. Maybe it's the aesthetic of suspicion that works like Gillen's had schooled me in, but in a slightly paranoid way, I began to think I saw underlying patterns and hidden intentions at work among the different pieces of art. After all, the subject of censorship, and more specifically the

counterintuitive call to ban works of art in order to guarantee art's broader integrity, is embedded in the exhibition, through a suite of paintings by Frances Stark that reproduce the text of an essay by the rock musician Ian Svenonius titled "Censorship Now!" "We need censorship," writes Svenonius, and "'freedom of expression' is a red herring; a beard, a ploy, a false-flag operation." Censorship is the necessary consequence of art's significance, and where one is lacking, so is the other. "Art is in a lost state now," he says. "Censorship would immediately grant it a compass, a meaning, a purpose, a direction, give it its power back." Stark's paintings can't tell us whether Svenonius really means what he's saying, or if he is merely using hyperbole to highlight the dilemma in which art finds itself now that, after the age of the avant-gardes, it has been welcomed back into the bosom of the establishment. But even if he does believe what he says, can Stark, who is relaying his ideas through an uncensored medium, really agree? One of the most overtly declarative works in the show turns out to be one of the most ambiguous; in the context of the Schutz controversy, it is also one of the most suggestive. I couldn't help but wonder, as I viewed Stark's paintings: Is the demand to censor Schutz's painting a mark of its power?

The question as to what's worth censoring was raised, as well, by an installation by Pope.L, aka William Pope.L, *Claim (Whitney Version)* (2017). This is a freestanding room covered inside and out with slices of bologna arranged in a grid, each with a blurry black-and-white photocopied image on it, which one can vaguely make out as pictures of people. A framed text claims these to be representative of a

certain percentage of New York's Jewish population. The museum's own wall label points out that the "claim" is numerically inaccurate, and that there is no reason to think that the unrecognizable people pictured are Jewish. But why has Pope.L chosen to focus on New York's Jews for his demonstration that "so-called knowledge is used to construct a picture of certainty via the phantom of accuracy"? One clue that might help answer this question is the fact that his installation appears to be a takeoff on the installations of Christian Boltanski, which often allude to the Holocaust. If this is the case, then it seems like his work might raise a question: Does Pope.L mean to question the knowledge shared by Boltanski and the rest of us about the murder of European Jews, or the numbers associated with it?

If I were to think he meant to downgrade the Holocaust to "so-called knowledge," I might be calling for some censorship myself. But as I said, the Biennial seemed calculated to induce in me a strange propensity toward suspicion, one I prefer to restrain. And I believe there's another reading of Pope.L's work: He is trying to encourage a specifically artistic skepticism, and I'd guess he agrees with Boltanski that "the less information you have, the more open the work, the more you can think about it." And yet the circumscribed realm of artistic inquiry can't really be so easily cordoned off from its social and political implications—as the storm over *Open Casket* makes clear.

As for Schutz, she has two other paintings in the Biennial besides *Open Casket*. In an uncanny way, they seem to foretell the controversy that her painting of Till

provoked. The first thing one sees as the elevator doors open on the Whitney's fifth floor is her big canvas *Elevator* (2017)—part of a recent series she's been painting of people fighting in elevators. This one has evidently been painted specially for the occasion: Its dimensions reflect those of the nearby freight elevator, as if she were predicting that the Whitney itself would be the scene of an altercation and, according to the wall label, "inviting us to consider our own position or role amid the chaos" in which people (as the exhibition catalog has it) "struggle maniacally against each other but also against the act of representation itself." Schutz's other painting, of a female figure hiding her face, perhaps weeping, is called *Shame* (2017)—again, as if the artist were predicting that she herself might be shamed by her own "position or role."

And what about *Open Casket*? I was surprised at what a quiet painting it is. It turns out that, even in making use of that horrific photograph, Schutz was practicing restraint. Far from making a spectacle of the tormented corpse, she has generalized Till's face into a nearly abstract concatenation of marks—though Schutz's technique is very different, you might think of Francis Bacon's blurred faces. Is she being evasive? Perhaps, though one might also argue that the blurred face is one seen through eyes filled with tears, and that the painting's central concern is in evoking an emotion rather than conveying the image that caused the emotion.

But what surprised me most when I saw *Open Casket* was something that had gone mostly unmentioned in the various commentaries I'd come across: the fact, not visible

in photographs of the painting, that it has a prominent relief element. Its surface is not flat; it has a raised and sculpted portion that looks swollen and gouged. The painting's surface thus becomes a metaphor for the tormented body it depicts—a peculiar way of the representation itself becoming, in Pope.L's words, "a shadow of the thing it claims to portray." At the same time, this strange, blobby protrusion gives the appearance that something has been hidden in the painting and that (although the museum label lists only oil on canvas as its materials) there is some other matter secreted under the paint surface we see.

The fact that this surface-as-metaphor has mostly gone unremarked by commentators might be because they are depending on photographs of the painting that fail to register the work's relief element; but for a painting that is based on a photograph to have an element that resists being photographed suggests that the work is concerned precisely with what photographs and paintings don't have in common—with the possibility that what a photograph conveys can never be what a painting conveys, and vice versa.

Schutz's painting both validates and contradicts the idea that art is powerful only to the extent that it attracts censorship. On the one hand, the controversy has made it harder to attend equally to the many other works in the Biennial. So many of them—even ones that in some other context I'd have appreciated—seemed bland or inconsequential by comparison. But by the same token, the controversy had also diverted attention from the painting

itself, as shown by the fact that so many of those rushing to express an opinion had apparently not even seen it in person.

Still, I couldn't help wondering whether the curators' choice of that particular work by Stark, with its counterintuitive plea for censorship, and of those three particular paintings by Schutz, forming as they do a constellation around the themes of conflict, shame, and racial violence, aren't a set of clues to the larger narrative they had in mind—and whether Hannah Black's intervention might not be (to borrow Svenonius's phrase) a false-flag operation. There is no evidence that this is the case, but imagine if Black were working at the curators' behest, in a performance intended to put into action their "belief that the Whitney, as a museum of American art, must engage this enduring history, and that art is critical to this conversation."

Black's letter certainly took the Biennial way past the complacent acceptance characteristic of the first reviews and much closer to what Locks, in the first line of her catalog essay, rightly calls the "social tension so thick it coats the throat" that permeates the country today. In a funny way, the show's admirable inclusiveness—it's the most ethnically, geographically, and aesthetically diverse Whitney Biennial I've seen—might otherwise have smoothed over this tension, giving the show merely the satisfying appearance of an agreement in which no vital interests are at stake; but any chance of that blew up when Black published her letter.

Now that that's happened, is it still possible to see the Whitney Biennial as an art exhibition, rather than as merely the site of struggles for power? It's not easy. The conflicts we are living through are part of the matter of the art being made now, but the art can't be reduced to a direct reflection of those conflicts. Art may be the representation of a struggle, but it is also (as that wall label for *Elevator* puts it) a struggle against representation. And if representation, as Pope.L says, is merely the shadow of what it aims to represent, we have to be aware that a shadow rarely has the same shape as the thing that casts it. That's why you can make the shadow of a dog's head on the wall using your two hands—you don't need a dog at all.

After a few hours roving through the Whitney, I could see the reasons both for the critics' approval and for many artists' reservations. The show hangs together thematically—but experientially, not so much. Especially strong was the disparity I felt between works, such as those by Pope.L and Stark, that are based on semiotic conundrums; the relatively scarce ones with fundamentally visual concerns (here I'd think of the candy-colored psychedelic landscape paintings by Shara Hughes, or Carrie Moyer's abstractions); and the many that offer diverse, more or less uneasy combinations of the two. And then there are the purely didactic contributions, such as the Occupy Museums group's agitprop in favor of artists mired in debt and against MoMA trustee Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock and an adviser to President Trump. The sudden transitions, as one moves from one room and artist to the next, can cause a sort of aesthetic equivalent of the bends.

And I was disappointed with the works by some of the unfamiliar artists. Too many of them are presenting what feel like derivative versions of familiar styles, sometimes of better-known artists who are also in the Biennial. But there are a few whose work I'll be hoping to see more of. I've already mentioned one, Oto Gillen. Another is Asad Raza, whose work on view is an installation of potted trees under UV lighting that hits some of their leaves at an angle that turns them violet. Many of the trees have objects in or next to the pots they're planted in—the belongings of people who are supposed to act as the trees' "caretakers." According to the catalog, these people "perform various activities, such as offering food, speaking to visitors, or enacting immaterial artistic structures, thus shifting 'between explanatory, performative, and sociable modes of behavior,' as Raza explains." I didn't encounter any of these on my visit, but neither did I feel anything was missing. The minimal transformation of the trees' color by way of lighting, and the somewhat mysterious presence among them of the various little objects, was enough to induce in me a mode of irenic receptivity that was a welcome respite from the fierce contention to which much of the rest of the show had me attuned. And I'll be hoping to encounter again the work of Kaari Upson, whose atmospherically colored urethane sculptures have been cast from manipulated, misshapen pieces of a found sectional sofa; the results are unearthly in color and yet strangely carnal in form.

Of course, there are many more things worth talking about in this expansive, uneven exhibition. I'm tempted to offer a roll call of artists, but that wouldn't make for very

interesting reading. In the end, the cry for censorship at the center of several of the exhibition's pieces has made the whole show hard to see. But it's worth the effort, whether you like what you find or not.

1 COMMENT

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