



THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL'S POLITICAL MOOD

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The first Whitney Biennial at the museum's two-year-old downtown digs (owing to the move, it comes a year late) aims "to gauge the state of art in America today." The result, which is earnestly attentive to political moods and themes, already feels nostalgic. Most of the works were chosen before last year's Presidential election. Remember back then? Worry, but not yet alarm, permeated the cosmopolitan archipelago of new art's creators, functionaries, and fans. Now there's a storm. The Age of Trump erodes assumptions about art's role as a barometer—and sometime engine—of social change. Radicalism has lurched to the right, and populist nationalism, though it has had little creative influence so far, challenges sophisticated art's presumption to the crown of American culture. The crisis makes any concerted will to "resist" awkward for those whose careers depend on rich collectors and elite institutions, sitting ducks for plain-folk resentment. Of course, artists are alert to ironies. The near future promises surprising reactions and adaptations to the new world disorder. But, for now, all former bets are off. The ones placed by the Biennial's curators, Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, preface an unfolding saga in which, willy-nilly, all of us are characters.

The show is winningly theatrical in its use of the Whitney's majestic new spaces. Lew and Locks sensibly show far fewer participants than in the 2014 Biennial—sixty-three, down from a hundred and three—given the futility of trying to comprehend the ranks of serious artists, swelled by the field's wealth and glamour, who have come to number in the many thousands. The curators have opted for depth over breadth, affording many of the artists what amounts to pocket solo shows. The criteria seem to be technical skill and engaging subject matter, with formal aesthetics taking third place. Most substantial, on all counts, are the works by several painters, in a striking comeback for a medium that was often sidelined in the Biennials of the past two decades. The revival may reflect a market that is ever avid for things to adorn walls, but I think it also fulfills a desire for relief from our pixelated ambience. Dana Schutz is a new master, with subjects that are frankly goofy—people and giant insects piled together in an elevator, for instance—but which she renders with powerfully volumetric, big-brushed forms that are at once lyrical and monumental. Jo Baer, famous half a century ago for her minimalist abstractions, astonishes with perfectly scaled, sensitive paintings, on gray fields, of mingled artifacts, buildings, and landscapes that are redolent of cultures ancient, medieval, and modern.

The work in the Biennial that you are most apt to remember, "The Meat Grinder's Iron Clothes" (2017), by the Los Angeles artist Samara Golden, marries technique and storytelling on a grandiose scale. Golden has constructed eight miniaturized sets of elaborately furnished domestic, ceremonial, and institutional interiors. They sit on top of and are mounted, upside down, beneath tiers that frame one of the Whitney's tall and wide window views of the Hudson River. Surrounding mirrors multiply the sets upward, downward, and sideways, to infinity. To reach a platform with a midpoint view of the work, you ascend darkened ramps, on which ominous hums, bongs, and whooshes can be heard. Concealed fans add breezes. Politics percolate in evocations of social class and function, with verisimilitude tipping toward the surreal in, for

example, a set that suggests at once a beauty parlor, a medical facility, and a prison. But the work's main appeal is its stunning labor-intensiveness: sofas and chairs finely upholstered, tiny medical instruments gleaming on wheeled carts. Golden is the most ambitious of several artists in the show who appear bent on rivalling Hollywood production design, with a nearly uniform level of skill. I'm reminded of a friend's remark, apropos of the recent New York art fairs: "I thought I missed good art, but that's always rare. What I miss is bad art."

Political causes register in mostly understated ways, as with suites of photographs or videos pertaining to racial, ethnic, and gender identities. Again, you will seek bad art in vain, unless you count the crude-on-purpose banners by the California-born Chicago artist Cauleen Smith, with their perfunctory design and messages of laconic anguish. (One reads, "No wonder I go under.") Also rugged, quite effectively, are the satiric paintings and drawings by Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, a New Yorker transplanted to Los Angeles, whose targets range from narcissistic leftists to the crowd at a Trump rally (the latter is subtitled "And some of them I assume are good people"). L.A. is also represented by two much discussed artists: Rafa Esparza, who has created a room of handmade adobe bricks, as a shelter for works by other artists, and Henry Taylor, who offers a stark painting, in his more usually infectious Expressionist manner, of a black man killed by the police.

Staggeringly beautiful, in image and sound (including an orchestral version of "Stormy Weather" that just about made me cry), is a documentary video shot on an Aleut-populated island in the Bering Sea, by Sky Hopinka, a Native American from Washington State. The show's most strident agitprop is "Debtfair" (2012-17), an enormous installation by a largely New York-based group, Occupy Museums, which emerged from the Occupy Wall Street campaign. In text and in a mélange of mediums, the piece expounds on the plight of contemporary artists burdened by financial debt, mainly from student loans, relative to the profiteers of the booming art-as-asset economy. Incorporated works are for sale, at prices related to how much the artists owe.

Ecological activism has an inning with "Root sequence. Mother tongue" (2017), by Asad Raza, who is from Buffalo and divides his time between New York and Brussels. The piece is composed of twenty-six trees in progressive stages of budding, leafing, and blooming, in the accelerated spring of a gallery that has a sunrise-facing glass wall. On-site caretakers will inform you, in eager detail, about the varieties: cherry, birch, persimmon, and others. You may find it hard to tell the forest from (forgive me) the twee, the piece is so wholesome. It's pretty, though. For a savage antidote, nearby there's "Real Violence" (2017), by the shockmeister Jordan Wolfson, who caused a stir at the David Zwirner Gallery, last year, with a huge robotic mechanism of chains and pulleys that dragged and slammed around the room a life-size puppet with a face like Howdy Doody's and pleading video eyes. Here Wolfson provides virtual-reality headsets for a video of him bashing the head of another man with a baseball bat, on a street lined with office buildings, to the accompaniment of the sung Hanukkah prayer. Your discomfort is first abetted and then abated by the continual twitching of the victim, whom a single blow should have quieted. How Wolfson made what is in fact an animatronic doll appear real is a mystery typical of new art's galloping technological novelties, and one likely to become old hat in short order. (I don't know about you, but V.R. makes me feel less transported to another place than eliminated from it.)

As jazzy as many of the works in this Biennial are, there's an air of complacent calm: so many tasks superbly completed, so many social issues responsibly advanced, so much

professionalism in evidence. Engineers sometimes say that a machine works with maximum efficiency just before it breaks. That's my feeling about this show's beamish collegiality, and it might have been the same, only less painfully, were Hillary Clinton in the White House. Times of social upheaval throw artists back on reconceiving their purpose and on choosing whether to address public affairs or to maintain refuge from them. Anguish is assured. Conflicts are probable. The next Biennial bodes drama.