

ARTFORUM

Topical Malady: Tobi Haslett on the Whitney Biennial

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Cauleen Smith, *I'm So Black That I Blind You*, 2017, satin, poly-satin, wool felt, wool velvet, indigo-dyed silk-rayon velvet, indigo-dyed silk satin, embroidery floss, acrylic fabric paint, polyester fringe, poly-silk tassels, sequins, 67 × 50". From the series "In The Wake," 2017. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017. Photo: Chandra Glick.

AIMLESSNESS IS A HAZARD OF BIENNIALS. The Whitney's current edition is so twitching and distractible that it risks flattening itself into a vast, paratactic prairie. Time, in the art world, advances in mincing two-year increments, furnishing us with new batches of objects but seldom a new idea. Curators, then, saddled with the absurd task of "capturing the moment," resort to the eclectic. But in the right hands, eclecticism can itself be spun into an expedient little point.

"This Biennial," proclaims the opening wall text, "arrives at a time rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics." Pretend this isn't always true—quite hard to do, if you've got a crotchety Marxist superego—and you'll have to admit the cleverness of the gesture. (Though it's not as clever as **Cauleen Smith's** hand-stitched banners covered in aphorisms—I'M SO BLACK THAT I BLIND YOU—that glower at the whole pious enterprise.) If ours is an age of scattered impulses, monstrous churning, and outsize, sickly contradictory torments, then cast a wide net! So curators Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks have assembled a sprawling show that applies itself dutifully to every aspect of our cultural psychosis—from racism to tech-utopianism to the tyranny of debt—freely admitting that their topic is, well, topicality. The result is an inevitably flailing exhibition, a massive, splashing sea broken in places by reefs of good work smartly hung.

But the flail prevails. Tala Madani's paintings put her delicate line in the service of potty humor, as her figures, always limpid and finely wrought, shoot shafts of light from their anuses. This is either proof of some tightly coiled psychoanalytic principle or a well-placed joke. It's a study in contrasts, then, that Madani's snickering works (including a video) occupy one corner of a room otherwise conquered with haughty, monumental presumption by the sculptures of the collective KAYA (Kerstin Brätsch and Debo Eilers). Synthetic materials have been stuck, bolted, melted, and jammed into one another; the wall text informs us that these ceiling-hung or wall-mounted "body bags" (as the artists call them) were conceived as part of a procession. Proceed to the next room and you'll find Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's paintings, which are cluttered with Americana tchotchkes rendered in a contemporary approximation of folk. Perplexing that, given their location to the right of the elevator banks, these two rooms are likely the viewer's first taste of the Biennial; more perplexing that Jessi Reaves's lovely, clever furniture pieces are here made to skulk around the edges.

It's a relief, then, that Deana Lawson and Henry Taylor share a large gallery. Their "years-long creative dialogue and exchange" is the show's apex, as Lawson's photographs and Taylor's acrylic paintings launch a pincer attack on the problem of how black life might be captured in two dimensions. Most of the people in Lawson's pictures are fixed in stiff poses, their gazes frankly countering the camera's as they sit or stand or lean or loom. Interiors dominate and are a mix of embroidered fabrics, framed portraits, and stretches of blank white wall. The uncanny stiltedness of the photos locks the black figure—or "black body," in antihumanist parlance—in an Arbus-like pact with the discipline of design. The characters in *Ring Bearer*, 2016, are of a piece with their patterned curtains, and in *Signs*, 2016, four men with tattooed torsos throw up their hands—hands clenched in the intricate signifiers of their gang. The black male as hunted and ornate, as style and as glyph.

Enter Taylor, whose acrylics don't just blunt or dissolve the detail of Lawson's prints. Rather, he irrigates her sensibility, his work a neat complement to her exacting articulation. The most striking of Taylor's paintings, the canvas that blurts its own urgency, is *The Times They Aint a Changing, Fast Enough!*, 2017. Dwarfing Lawson's *Ring Bearer* (which hangs beside it), Taylor's work shows us the death-by-policeman of Philando Castile in rough, jerky brushwork that smashes the scene into blocks of color. Expressive élan becomes harshly flat. But the blurred smartphone footage of Castile's slaughter—infamous and ubiquitous last summer—is also dignified by Taylor's grand scale, which beams the kingliness of history painting at this latest racist crisis. I'm touched by the resigned humor of the title: It tunes the work's emotional force, as Taylor declares the gravity of the occasion without languishing in his virtue. It seems right, now, to be rueful.

But another, littler feature of Taylor's canvas—one that's not *entirely* beside the point—is its deft treatment of "networked technologies." By translating a pixelated image into painterly gesture, Taylor announces the agency, the blunt, world-shaping *will*, of the artist's hand: a rebuke to the punitive impersonality of our political and digital machines. Technology as premise (as opposed to conclusion) is something of a theme, I suppose, as this Biennial is dotted with work that strives for a more sensitive and digested relationship to digital images: Tommy Hartung's stop-motion video collage *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, 2015, for instance, or Anicka Yi's prettily arranged essay film *The Flavor Genome*, 2016. The latter is a Herzogian parable about the pharmaceutical industry and was shot in 3-D, an artifice that isn't simply dumped onto the project but is used to delicate effect: Yi plucks out details without bombing the retina. That job is reserved for Jordan Wolfson, whose virtual-reality piece *Real Violence*, 2017, portrays an act of brutal assault (skull, baseball bat). The scene is horrid, and the horror is bland. More interesting than watching the piece is watching people watch it, their hands gripping

a metal pole for balance, their faces snared in headphones and headsets, the paraphernalia soon to be wiped clean by gallery attendants. For all the gore and depravity, my most vivid memory of the piece is the stink of disinfectant.

But surely Wolfson is dispensing some political lesson? Surely there's some reflexive point to be drawn from this prank on museum patrons who come to the Whitney in droves for—among other things—a chance to contemplate the delicious urgency of “the issues”? This Biennial arrives a year late (they had to build a new museum), which, it turns out, meant that the show would open in a moment of appalling chaos, when the technocratic politesse that had long made things seem *nearly* tolerable finally collapsed. One small consequence of the Trump victory is that a sense of social mission, however misplaced, has become *de rigueur* for the dukes and duchesses of the culture industry, whose grasp of politics has always been gestural or conveniently, passionately inadequate. If you'd like to see a work of art that, more succinctly than Wolfson's, sums up the slack logic, embarrassing postures, and galling cluelessness that accompany our current clumsy lunge, I suggest you remove your headset, descend one floor, and have a look at Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till's destroyed face. Aimlessness is a hazard of biennials.

The Whitney Biennial is on view through June 11 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Tobi Haslett has written about art, film, and literature for n+1, the New Yorker, the Village Voice, and elsewhere.