

## Whitney Biennial 2017 Evolves Beyond Precious, Pretentious Or Tired

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### Cauleen Smith



The 2017 Whitney Biennial, the first at the new spacious downtown location, is a total home run. Form, function and fun come together. The curators make brilliant use of Renzo Piano's sprawling architectural design and none of the art is precious, pretentious, or tired. Piano designed the museum with a grid in the ceiling to allow flexibility for installing walls at will and this show, set up like a maze, took full advantage of Piano's vision. There is a lot of L-shaped corners throughout the cavernous space that creates mini galleries. The cubed off sections help viewers to focus and hone in on the 63 artists one at a time. The little cubbies become commas between thoughts and give viewers breathing room and intimate time to ponder while wandering around the sections. Even though there's a plethora of images and concepts, in this year's Biennial, you never feel overwhelmed or visually exhausted.

Upon entering the front door lobby, colourfully worded banners hang from the ceiling, the creation of artist **Cauleen Smith**. Smith marries text and texture in shapes reminiscent of medieval shields or family crests. The sexy colours and tawdry trims have a showgirl feel, but the messages embroidered on the banners, for instance, "I am so black that I blind you" are of urgent protest. These messages are in light of the ever more frequent marches taking place across the globe in pursuit of freedom and equality. These banners are scattered throughout the exhibition as part of a procession and are meant to read like film stills of our troubled times.