

Creators

9 Artists You Should Give a F*ck About at the 2017 Whitney Biennial

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For the Whitney Museum of American Art's first Biennial in its new home in the Meatpacking district, its curators chose quintessentially 2017 key themes: the formation of self and the individual's place in a turbulent society. As you might expect, traces of American political turmoil tinge much of the art.

Getting off the elevators on the Whitney's fifth floor, Occupy Museums' Debtfair infographic offers visitors a primer on the debt economy and its effect on the art market. Embedded in gallery walls, Puppies Puppies' disembodied triggers clock the prevalence of gun violence in America. The euphemistic slogan the current administration uses to justify its discriminatory rhetoric—"Make America Great Again"—makes an appearance too, in Celeste Dupuy-Spencer's Trump Rally (And some of them I assume are good people). In a nod to many Americans' Orwellian, Black Mirror-fueled anxieties, many artists tapped emerging technologies, as in Jon Kessler's sculpture of beachgoing mannequin-androids strapped into VR headsets.

The entire vibe is more than a bit dystopian, but, by and large, our favorite pieces were those that leveraged digital tools in unexpected ways, such as Anicka Yi's masterful use of 3D film-making to tell a tale of bio-hacking, or reclaimed traditional mediums to reflect the lives of modern Americans, as in Aliza Nisenbaum's oil paintings of undocumented immigrants. In an era in which truth feels elusive, these artists hold the reality of the American experience squarely in their gaze.

Reminiscent of choice-driven computer games like The Oregon Trail, Porpentine Charity Heartscape's web-based computer game room challenges power dynamics through surreal, decision-based narratives. Computer terminals fill a nook on the Whitney's sixth floor, inviting visitors to sit down and navigate weird, frightening worlds through multiple-choice questions. Choose wisely, for the game serves emotionally manipulative responses, eliciting feelings of frustration, triumph, and shame.

Raúl de Nieves

Mexican-born, Brooklyn-based artist Raúl de Nieves' works are some of the grandest on display at the Biennial. His site-specific "stained glass" piece, beginning & the end neither & the otherwise betwixt & between the end is the beginning & the end, stretches across six floor-to-ceiling windows, and though the intricate, prismatic work looks forged from colored glass and lead piping, it's made from art supplies you might find in an elementary school craft bin: paper, wood, glue, tape, beads, and acetate sheets.

Similarly, de Nieves' elaborately beaded sculptures embody the magic of transformation. Some are shoes so laden with decoration that they become calcified, rhinestoned abstractions of themselves. Others are heavy costumes de Nieves wears in his performances, frozen in subversive or menacing poses.

Leigh Ledare

His 16mm projections are far from the most imposing works on view, but the quietude of Leigh Ledare's Moscow street scenes belie the film's grim observations on human nature. Capturing interactions between people outside three adjacent train stations, *Vokzal* links the actions of individuals to signs of social breakdown. The whole thing is synchronized with a slowed-down revision of a Neu! track from 1973.

Aliza Nisenbaum

Aliza Nisenbaum's colorful portraits seem deceptively simple. Using vibrant oil paint on linen, the artist depicts everyday intimacies, like a couple reading *The New York Times* or a running club posed on an asphalt track. Nisenbaum's subjects, however, are often undocumented immigrants, a population largely unseen but readily vilified. Her images empower and acknowledge the immigrant experience by committing their lives to canvas, preserving their names and faces through a medium once strictly reserved for the wealthy and white.

Pope.L, a.k.a., William Pope.L

Not going to lie: Pope.L's cube covered in 2,755 slices of bologna (top image) made us queasy. The curling, dripping slices of deli meat arranged in a grid and each affixed with a black-and-white photo of a person are impressive for their precision but also smell revolting. What strikes us about the work, though, is the text mounted inside the meat-covered cube. Its manipulation of language, facts, and data is mesmerizing. Pro tip: snap a photo of the text on your phone so you can read it far, far away from the bologna aroma.

Lyle Ashton Harris

Stepping into Lyle Ashton Harris's ethereal installation of projected photos and videos feels a little bit like boarding the Magic School Bus and paying a trip to the recesses of the artist's mind. His *Once (Now) Again* comprises images of Harris's friends, family, and lovers shot between 1986 and 1998, bearing witness to major societal shifts, like the emergence of multiculturalism, AIDS activism, and LGBTQ rights, through the lens of the artist's intimate relationships. Roberta Flack, John Coltrane, and Grace Jones tracks add atmosphere.

Anicka Yi

Few sights excited us more than Anicka Yi's mesmerizing 3D film *The Flavor Genome*. It's a 22-minute nature special/science documentary hybrid with a twist: the gorgeously shot film follows a "flavor chemist" on a prospecting trip through the Amazon, confronting the lure of chemical augmentation and anxieties around genetic engineering and biotechnology. Shots of meticulously arranged plant and animal matter in a laboratory evoke the food porn of shows like *Chef's Table*. Measured narration and subtle factual embellishments make the fiction of the film seem probable: if Yi's hybrid, artificial world isn't today's reality, it could be tomorrow's. Her masterful manipulation of 3D filmmaking is unexpected and strong; this is no red-and-blue glasses jump scare at the cinema. It foreshadows an exciting future for 3D filmmaking.

Oto Gillen

The accessibility of Instagram contributes to the seeming ubiquity of street photography: anyone with an iPhone can take to the streets and shoot. But it takes an eye like Gillen's to capture scenes of tender, weird humanity amidst the crush of New York City's population. His photographs in the Biennial are all vertical (or vertically cropped) and projected onto a towering wall, and the effect is a little like a massive phone screen beaming forth scenes of skyscrapers and life at street level. A youngster in glasses and an eye patch stares at us with feet akimbo; a couple steals a kiss on a street corner. It's a soft and moving snapshot of a city that'd rather not slow down.

Cauleen Smith

Hanging in the lobby and on the fifth floor, Cauleen Smith's elaborate hand-stitched banners evoke the protest signage Americans are seeing a lot more of these days. Designed to be used in processions, the works stem, in part, "from the artist's sense of disgust and fatigue when confronted with video after video offering evidence of police violence against Black people," according to curatorial text. Urgent and beautiful, the sequin-covered banners feel like deeply personal instruments of change.



Installation view of Whitney Biennial 2017 (Floor 5), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. March 13-June 11, 2017. Photograph by Matthew Carasella.