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Why the Whitney's Humanist, Pro-Diversity Biennial Is a Revelation

Roberta Smith

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Since moving downtown, the Whitney Museum of American Art has grown up, thanks to a larger, dashing new building, more ambitious exhibitions and new responsibilities brought by rising attendance and membership. No surprise, its biennial has grown up, too. Perhaps less expected: So has the art in it. This show's strength and focus make it doubly important at a time when art, the humanities and the act of thinking itself seem under attack in Washington.

The 2017 Biennial, the first held in the expansive Renzo Piano-designed structure on Gansevoort Street, is an adult affair: spatially gracious to art and visitors alike, and exceptionally good looking, with an overall mood of easy accessibility. My first thought: It needs a little more edge. Yet this show navigates the museum's obligations to a broader public and its longtime art-world audience with remarkable success. Organized by Christopher Y. Lew, the Whitney's associate curator, and Mia Locks, an independent curator, it has some immature inclusions and other letdowns. But once you really start looking, there's edge all over the place.

The show spotlights 63 artists and collectives working at the intersection of the formal and the social, and in this it announces a new chapter of so-called political art – though one already brewing in small museums, galleries and studios. Many of these artists confront such American realities as income inequality, homelessness, misogyny, immigration, violence, hatred and biases of race, religion and class. But they are equally committed to the artistic exploration of media and materials, and to the creation of bold and strange things to see and think about.

Important messages are conveyed through perception. Take Henry Taylor's gripping history painting of Philando Castile dying in the passenger seat of his car in a St. Paul suburb, having just been shot by a policeman whose gun, arm and uniform are visible through the car window. We are inside the car, in the driver's seat, bearing witness with Diamond Reynolds, Mr. Castile's girlfriend, as she live-streams his mortal injury on a cellphone. Mr. Castile, a school cafeteria manager, has the noble head of a Greek bronze, complete with a jawline beard and an eye whose flat whites the Greeks would have made from silver or alabaster inlay. His shirt is spattered with paint, not blood. Mr. Taylor's style is harsh but it doesn't overplay.

Samara Golden's "The Meat Grinder's Iron Clothes" is a dystopian combination of mirrors and eight half-size miniature interiors – including some upside down – that create endless kaleidoscopic reflections of class conflict. Overlooking the Hudson River, it includes a drab office full of computer stations, an all-white aspirational Upper East Side living room and some merging of high-end hospital and prison featuring pink wheelchairs and filthy toilets. The melding of pleasure and horror it can elicit would have delighted Georges Bataille, the radical philosopher for whom "truth has only one face: that of a violent contradiction."

This Biennial follows the lead of Kerry James Marshall's painting retrospective at the Met Breuer last fall, which set a high standard for social engagement sustained by formal ambition. This presentation is also an important bookend to the 1993 Biennial, a raucous, untidy show

unforgettable for the real-life issues it threw in viewers' faces – and for often overly didactic, hectoring and visually dry art. The current Biennial reflects the emergence of artists committed to political subject matter but unwilling to limit themselves artistically or to lecture viewers. Mr. Marshall, who presides here in absentia, has lots of company.

Some of the breathtaking openness and diversity of contemporary art is evident in this show's participants and its range of media – from painting, which is plentiful and mostly but not entirely figurative, to digital and virtual-reality art. Nearly half are female, and half nonwhite; its demographics argue that not only do black lives matter (along with Hispanic, Asian, Muslim and immigrant lives), they are essential to our quality of life – physical, emotional, cultural, linguistic, economic, educational, environmental.

The show is promising from the start, in the lobby, which is festooned with 10 opulently embroidered and appliquéd banners by Cauleen Smith, a Chicago artist whose work is also in the film program. Serious yet melodramatic, they contrast statements of stark deprivation (“I Cannot Be Fixed”) with images of exposed hearts; weapons; burning eight balls; broken pencils; and a large, injured eye, conjuring faith, superstition, violence and thwarted expression.

The intensity grows in the gallery off the lobby, where Rafa Esparza, of Los Angeles, has inserted “Figure Ground: Beyond the White Field,” a magical circular room (and floor) made of adobe bricks. It is in, but not of, the museum, and Mr. Esparza has invited five artists not officially in the Biennial to exhibit their work here, most notably Beatriz Cortez, whose 5-foot-high “Cairn,” assembled from large chunks of volcanic rock, is a fragile balancing act that speaks volumes about the precariousness of life today.

The two main floors of the show, five and six, each begin with a large figurative painting. On the fifth floor, Dana Schutz's “Elevator,” commissioned by the museum, is a weak, scattered reprise of a smaller, better painting in her last gallery show. Two smaller Schutz works here are stronger: “Shame,” a study in contorted female self-loathing, and especially “Open Casket,” based on a famous photograph of Emmett Till, young, murdered and disfigured, in his coffin. Ms. Schutz doesn't picture his wounds as much as the pain of looking at them.

On the sixth floor, the opener is Mr. Taylor's ambitious “Ancestors of Ghenghis Khan With Black Man on Horse,” a mural-size canvas. It lacks the clarity of the Philando Castile painting (whose furious title is “The Times They Aint a Changing, Fast Enough!”) or “The 4th,” a canvas of a black man at a backyard grill that has the heft of an official royal portrait from centuries past. The large gallery that Mr. Taylor's paintings share with Deana Lawson's meticulous set-up photographs is one of the show's best.

Like Mr. Taylor, Ms. Lawson addresses the dangers, contradictions and cultural richness of living in America as a black person. She does so by extending the staged efforts of photo artists like Jeff Wall and Stan Douglas but with slightly smaller, more insistent color images. Showing black people at home, they imply the ties and tensions of family and friendship and smolder with quiet determination. The ambiguous “Sons of Cush,” revolving around two men, a tiny baby and a fist full of cash, is as full of symbols as a Renaissance painting.

The show is punctuated with other smart, mutually enhancing pairings. On the fifth floor, the

colorful paintings of Shara Hughes push natural forms toward feverish abstraction using the Fauves and early American modernists like Charles Burchfield. These analog visions sync up with the digital ones, directly adjacent, of Anicka Yi's "The Flavor Genome." This gorgeous high-definition 3-D video alternates between the Amazon rain forest and a pristine lab to tell a fictive story of "bioprospecting" in the name of global consumerism.

On the Hudson side of the sixth floor, Jessi Reaves's alternately raw and beautiful hybrids of found furniture and sculpture provide both seating and ingenious commentaries on design, modernism and waste. Their snarling energy is matched by their neighbors: the creepy coagulations of color, plastic, resin, drawing and grommets that form the paintings of KAYA, a collaboration consisting of the artists Kerstin Brätsch and Debo Eilers.

Some artists approach the unvarnished bluntness of the 1993 Biennial, with complexity. "A Very Long Line" – a four-channel video installation by the collective Postcommodity involving blurry images of tall fences shot from a moving car – takes over the walls of a small gallery, capturing the viewer in a noisily rattling cage. When you learn that the fences are on the Mexican border, the piece becomes a visceral metaphor for the experience of feeling, or being, trapped, that is now the fate of so many undocumented immigrants.

Jordan Wolfson's "Real Violence" provides a virtual-reality view of a brutal 90-second assault – real violence that many Americans rarely see. Horrible to watch, it should at least shock almost anyone into a better understanding of how scarring it is to witness physical savagery. "Real Violence" finds an apt foil in the discombobulated sculptures of Kaari Upson in the same gallery: urethane casts of severely damaged couches spray-painted shades of red, silver and pink that suggest bodies at once powerful and pathetic.

Impressively, the show's éminence grises are showing some of the best work of their careers. Larry Bell contributes "Pacific Red II," a majestic line of six large double-walled volumes made from progressively lighter or darker sheets of red laminated glass that combines East Coast and West Coast Minimalism as never before. The weird symbolism in Jo Baer's paintings fuse the grays of her early Minimalist abstractions with visions of Irish myths and monuments.

Other efforts deserving attention include the bravura abstract paintings of Carrie Moyer, among her best, and the gritty figurative ones of Celeste Dupuy-Spencer. The choreographer Maya Stovall offers videos of modern dance on Detroit sidewalks, vividly juxtaposing art and life. Tuan Andrew Nguyen's video "The Island," an unlikely combination of fact and fantasy, revisits the tiny Malaysian island of Pulau Bidong, which sheltered tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees who fled their country in the 1970s and '80s. Pope.L's enormous room covered inside and out with a careful grid of embellished slices of baloney, embodies his usual sarcasm, even if the point about population breakdowns remains obscure.

Oto Gillen's fugal video-slide show "New York, 2015 –" documents the denizens of our sanctuary city's public spaces – homeless people, food vendors, police officers, bike messengers – presenting a combination of striving and defeat (and surveillance). Providing contrast are shots of the luminous nocturnal beauty of skyscrapers under construction that will do nothing to succor the lives below. At the other end of the exhibition, Asad Raza's "Root sequence. Mother tongue" brings brief respite: 26 young, often flowering trees facing the flickering light of the city.

At a moment when a new president threatens to wipe out the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, this exhibition makes an exciting, powerful case for art. As seen here, art illuminates the diversity on which this country's greatness stands and – through its mysterious alchemy of beauty and reality, tragedy and joy – inspires us to think, know our better selves and fight back.