The Apprehensive Politics of a Generation Surface at the 2019 Whitney Biennial

Intellectual dispassion trumps emotional engagement at the latest edition of the Whitney Biennial.

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Dozens of clocks retrofitted with sandpaper hands tick in unison, redefining time as the destruction of timekeeping. Every minute that passes in Agustina Woodgate’s “National Times” (2016/2019) installation — currently on view in the 2019 Whitney Biennial — represents more than a small erasure of the past, but an extinguishing of the clock’s essential purpose. A nearby wall text explains that the conceptual project is “conditioned by the current state of labor and power, the slave clocks progressively erode their functional value, collectively reclaiming autonomy in the process of disintegration.”

How has the museum’s essential purpose shifted as the public grows cognizant of the inequitable relationships between money, power, and culture? And how has this great laboratory of democratic expression slowly eroded its own functional value, even as it purports to defend individuality and intellectualism?

Six months into an ongoing series of protests questioning the relationship between institutions and their politically unsavory sources of funding, the Whitney Museum of American Art has become an exemplar of the cultural crisis at hand, and the 2019 Whitney Biennial is a case study in how the art world continues to grapple with its political mandate. This is only the second biennial mounted at the Whitney’s Renzo Piano-designed structure on Gansevoort Street. There are 75 participants, half of whom are women, and more than half are people of color. Many of these artists are also very young; almost 75 percent are under the age of 40. Together, these exhibitors have created a very pleasing exhibition, but not one that will necessarily knock your socks off.

Curators Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley are dispassionate in their approach to contemporary American culture. Artists predominantly strike an elegiac tone throughout the exhibition, indicating that we have collectively reached the fourth stage of the grief cycle (depression) after...
spending the last few years vacillating between anger and bargaining with the reality of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential election win.

Tears symbolically flow from Josh Kline’s suite of neon-colored lightboxes, which drown photographs taken by the artist. There are some obvious juxtapositions, including an image of the Twitter bird alongside the US Capitol’s dome. Voices of worry emerge from Marcus Fischer’s tape recorder, which loops a chorus of concerns for the country from the artist and friends a day before Trump’s inauguration. “White supremacy.” “Fascism.” “Insanity taking over.” The speakers list their greatest fears, but it’s all delivered in a monotone drone that fails to make an emotional impact on the listener.

Affect failure is itself another unarticulated theme of this biennial. Artists consider how an architecture of apathy in American society has emboldened this country’s worst habits: racism, nationalism, and exceptionalism to name just a few.


Martine Syms, “People Who Aren’t Friends or Lovers or Exes” (2019) (photo Hrag Vartanian/Hyperallergic)
Artists Nicholas Galanin and Martine Syms tackle this subject in extremely different ways. The former weaves an enormous image of a static television set and calls it “White Noise, American Prayer Rug” (2019); the work blends the concept of whiteness in the United States with mass media’s antagonization of intolerance and hate. The latter uses her installation “People Who Aren’t Friends or Lovers or Exes” (2019) to discuss the concept of “threat modeling” — a process identifying risks to determine the utmost danger to one’s own security — within a network of emails, texts, and video messages. The artist speeds through the texts of these different missives, taking on the performative role of a threat model herself; ultimately, it’s a discussion about the vulnerability of Black women’s bodies online.

There’s also Milano Chow, who inserts androgynous female figures into renderings of neoclassical architecture. Providing glimpses into the interior lives of the women depicted, the artist attempts to reframe visual history around her subjects.

![A still from “Triple Chaser” showing various Safariland teargas canisters (image courtesy Forensic Architecture/Praxis Films)](image)

Even the biennial’s most controversial inclusion relies on an aesthetic of impartiality. Forensic Architecture, in collaboration with filmmaker Laura Poitras, has created a 10-minute video titled “Triple-Chaser” (2019) detailing the group’s extensive investigation into Warren Kanders and the Triple-Chaser grenades one of his companies sells. The musician David Byrne narrates the video with a smooth baritone, explaining how the group used machine learning technology to unearth links between the Whitney vice chairman’s weapons business and an array of violent clashes between governments and dissidents around the world. But even here — where tension between the exhibitor and institution should be at its peak — there’s a surprising lack of conflict. After all, the Whitney has carved a large space within its galleries for the film to play. And Forensic Architecture, staffed by a group of academics, is by nature disinterested and professorial in their approach to research-based art. That doesn’t downplay the significance of what they are saying, but it does conform to this overeagerness by exhibitors to detach from their subjects.

Have artists abandoned outrage? And when the threat of oblivion becomes a permanent condition of life, does passion die? The necropolitics of the biennial is a move past postmodernism: artists are consciously reintroducing themselves into the frame but their work retains an emotional distance. In other words, artists want to act upon history while simultaneously acknowledging that history is acting upon them. This comes across clearly in Wangechi Mutu’s mumiform statues and Robert Bittenbender’s strangulation of wires, metal, and street trash.
But there’s a strained negotiation to this work, which I think derives from the contradictory cycles of information in the digital age. If Trump’s presidency has ushered in an era of dissensus where the border between fact and fiction has become imperceptible, then the level of risk associated with asserting any opinion (through art, writing, performance, etc.) has substantially increased. History becomes the last refuge for the artists, who excavates from the past to impact the present.
Many artists who practice in this archaeological mode do so as cryptographers. Maia Ruth Lee composes an economy of expressions with “LABYRINTH” (2019), a wall filled with metal instruments that look like they could be used on the farm or in a torture cell. The installation comes with a steel glyph chart that "translates" each object as an emotion (except one item that apparently means "tongue") and comes with its own horoscope that promises to "enhance your potential." In another gallery, Gala Porras-Kim brings three reproductions of the ancient Mojarra Stela into the museum. The characters on this Meso-American artifact are currently untranslatable — lost to a history subjugated by the European colonists who conquered North America and decimated its indigenous populations. Accordingly, the artist asks how we can relate to indecipherable histories, and how we might unlock the past through an aesthetic relationship.

The curators succeed best at the biennial when they can draw out these historiographic similarities in the galleries. One of the best pairings is between the photographer Paul Mpagi Sepuya and the sculptor Matthew Angelo Harrison. Here, both artists play with theories of reproduction and authorship to question preconceived notions of queerness and Blackness, respectively. Sepuya accomplishes his task by extending his invitation to other artists and featuring their work alongside his own trippy camera collage portraits. The Detroit-based Harrison works toward the past in what he calls an "abstracted ancestry." He adopts a post-Fordist model of production, submerging what appear to be traditional African spears and sculptures in black resin. What remain are three-dimensional silhouettes, caustic reminders of the unfathomable distance of history even when we stand face-to-face with it.
My overall assessment of the 2019 Whitney Biennial is mixed. There’s a lot to like at the exhibition, but there’s not a lot to love. The lack of a strong curatorial thesis (which some museumgoers may like, as it resists a tendency toward grand narratives) ultimately hampers what is supposed to be an authoritative look at contemporary American art. But what defines this artistic cohort is kind of unclear. Conceptual art feels like an afterthought at the biennial. Blame it on lack of context or some other organizational flub, but works by the artists Iman Issa and Alexandra Bell fail to inspire despite their potent criticisms of ethnographic displays and newspaper evocations of racism, respectively. (For more context: Bell’s work is about the vilification of the Central Park Five, a group of Black teenage boys wrongfully accused by rape in 1989. Trump used the media blitz to call for the return of the death penalty in New York, reportedly spending $85,000 for an ad in the *New York Times* and three other publications saying just as much.)

Sculptural assemblages suffer because of an alarming homogeneity of forms: it’s mostly bric-a-brac allusions to Robert Rauschenberg, again stifling one’s ability to really engage with any number of these artists. Political shots are taken but lack the emotional payoff one might expect from works discussing histories of violence and racism. Overall, there’s an investigation of the past but a resistance toward direct engagement with it.

On the other hand, perhaps apprehension is our current mode of cultural production as we come to grips with a world on the slide toward ecological disaster and the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the rich and poor, artists included.
If that’s true, then Nicole Eisenman’s “Procession” (2019) is a monument to our times. The artist’s collection of sordid figures is a valediction on the sputtering wheels of American democracy. A motley crew of 10 figures has occupied the Whitney’s terrace. Made from disparate materials including sweatpants, mugwort, butcher’s wax, ball bearings, PVC, enamel, and raw wool — the group sculpture revels in its own imperfections. There’s a globular fountain puttering out water, a lazy bald eagle sitting down and out in a crate, and what appears to be a grown man riding piggyback on another. Who are these people and what kind of procession is this? Are these the anti-Kanders protesters, whose first action was to occupy the galleries during the Whitney’s Warhol exhibition? Or are these symbols of buffoonery, the bureaucrats who keep someone like Kanders in power? The artist’s message is much clearer according to its wall text.

“Procession” is for the downtrodden who have no choice but to move forward. It’s a subversion of the museum-as-sacred-temple trope, indicating that art world apathy (toward immigrants, toward minorities, toward women, toward the poor) should no longer have a place in culture. Addressing the Whitney, “Procession” sets the stage for future battles over the museum’s duty toward the public versus its board members, and how it will eventually — inevitably — inculcate the ongoing protests into its own institutional history.