



The Whitney Biennial 2019's Standout Artists Look Backwards, Forwards, All Around Us

Written by Diane Solway

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Lucas Blalock, *Donkeys Crossing the Desert*, 2019. Image courtesy the artist; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, NY and Zurich; and Rodolphe Janssen, Brussels.

Any show that attempts to present a snapshot of the current moment is bound to provoke a few noisy responses, which is why the Whitney Biennial is always so much fun to experience. With each new edition comes a fresh crop of artists, each with different sets of concerns and a unique way of expressing them. For its 89th and latest edition, the Whitney turned to Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley, two in-house curators, to deftly navigate the multiple streams of thought running through the country. The pair made 300 studio visits in under a year and selected 75 emerging and mid-career American artists or collectives to comment on the state of the nation. Their list skews young, with the majority of the participants under the age of 40. Most are artists of color. It's an even split between male and female. The world is changing.

Not surprisingly, the curators discovered a few common themes: Racial and gender struggle, the significance of community, and a focus on historical narratives. "The most overarching theme was artists using history as a way to re-imagine the present or the future," says Panetta, "whether by using historical photographs and film or found material and reconfiguring them to present an alternative. And it made sense because we're in this difficult moment, so how can history be something we learn from or rethink as we go forward?"

This Biennial is decidedly low-tech, with a lot of artists "emphasizing material and their hand" in making the work, she says. There are politics, too: the Whitney has been criticized for the presence on its board of Warren B. Kanders, the head of Safariland, a firm that manufactures military supplies including tear-gas canisters that have reportedly been used against migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border. One of the show's participants, **Forensic Architecture**, created a computer program to detect when Safariland's canisters are used; more than half of the exhibition's artists have signed a letter calling for Kanders to resign.



Installation view of Nicole Eisenman's *Procession*, 2018. Photo by Diane Solway

Among the Biennial standouts is **Nicole Eisenman's** *Procession*, 2019, the New York-based artist's commanding and very funny figurative tableaux that sprawls across the sixth floor terrace in majestic form. Get up close and personal: One hero expels smoky gas out of his butt-hole. Others not to miss are **Josh Kline's** haunting LED wall sculptures alluding to climate change; **Todd Gray's** inkjet prints and found frame series; **Elle Pérez's** bold portraits of intimates pushing their bodies toward pleasure, pain or transformation; and **Daniel Lind-Ramos's** fantastical sculptures made of found materials—including tarps distributed by FEMA—that reference the federal government's neglect of his native Puerto Rico and the role of black Puerto Ricans in the island's colonial history.



Daniel Lind-Ramos, *El Viejo (Contratista)* (*The Old Man: Construction Contractor*), 2016. Image courtesy the artist. Photograph by Daniel Lind-Ramos

Artists who have shared studio space or long-running dialogues also share rooms in the Biennial. The photographer **Lucas Blalock** is paired with his friend **Ragen Moss**, an artist who also works as a contracts lawyer. The Los Angeles-based Moss makes hanging, transparent sculptures that suggest biomorphic forms or cocoons. For the Biennial, she made nine sculptures representing types ranging from a lawmaker and a day laborer to an ogler. Made out of plastic, paint, and other media, they invite viewers to look into and through them. "A lot of recent contemporary sculpture is more surface-oriented," she says. "Your eyes sort of skim the outside of the work's crust. My work is interior-driven. The best moments are when you look inside the sculpture." Blalock, meanwhile, is represented by a billboard across from the Whitney made up of various pictures of donkeys he's taken and altered (at top). (Make sure to download his augmented-reality app for use with his billboard.) Visually cacophonous and humorous, Blalock's photographs combine digital and analogue procedures that call attention to his manipulations of everyday, overlooked objects. One of his pictures inside the museum features "makeup sponges doing a pretty good job pretending that they're eggs," he says. Another is a really large image of a living room in someone's house "that has this sort of presence in it. And this presence is an intervention on my part. And it's sort of somewhere between a figure and an abstraction. I've thought a lot about ectoplasm—the sort of stuff of ghost photography of the early 20th century. And it's got that kind of feeling. It's a picture of something that's not there, but of a kind of virtual world that really is there. I think it's awkward and sad and strange. If there's one piece that maybe embodies the feeling of the moment or of the last two years, that's the one."



Installation view of Ragen Moss's sculptures. Photo by Diane Solway



Detail of Ragen Moss's sculptures. Photo by Diane Solway

Another duo sharing a room at the Whitney are the artists **Eric N. Mack** and **Jennifer Packer**. Mack's delirious hanging fabric sculptures, stitched together from various fabrics that he paints on and collages, explore the gap between art and fashion. Cutting into the room, they set the stage for Packer's lush paintings, which you can actually view through the transparent organza Mack has used for his piece.



Installation view of Eric N. Mack's *Proposition: for wet Gee's Bend Quilts to replace the American flag—permanently*, 2019, and Jennifer Packer's *A Lesson in Longing*, 2019. Photo by Diane Solway

The ability to discern is very much at the heart of **Mathew Angelo Harrison's** stunning sculptures. Traditional wooden African figures, heads and spears, many sourced online or through collections, are encased in smoky resin and sit atop minimalist pedestals made of anodized aluminum. "I'm deliberately trying to obscure the opacity so you can't take it all in at first," says Harrison, who is based in Detroit, "where everyone in my family worked either in a factory or the military—something that contributed to the infrastructure of the country—so I'm thinking about materials." His new sculptures tackle the history of those materials and the politics of museum displays of African art.

Then there's **Martine Syms's** hypnotic video self-portrait *People Who Aren't Friends or Lovers or Exes*, 2019, which employs emails, screen grabs, artificial intelligence, and a digital avatar in a rumination on surveillance and security. Or, as Syms shouts in the video: "Who's trying to fuck me over right now?" Having become increasingly absorbed in the subject of AI, says the Los Angeles-based artist, "I became interested in whether or not what we really want is for the machine to do what we tell it to, or to do the things we want that we don't say."



Installation view of Simone Leigh's *Stick*, 2019. Photo by Diane Solway

Surely no other artist in the Whitney Biennial is getting the level of exposure in one city that **Simone Leigh** is enjoying. The New York-based artist is not only represented by *Brick House*, her 16-foot-tall figure of a black woman with cornrows and a dome-shaped torso, on the High Line, but by her Hugo Boss prize show now running at the Guggenheim Museum, as well as three new sculptures at the Whitney. Discovering that she had won the Boss prize, she had five months to get a show together, so she ended up preparing for her Whitney and Guggenheim showcases at the same time. Leigh, whose forms and materials are rooted in African cultural traditions, presents three monumental sculptures that riff on the female body, race, and beauty. "It's very significant to me to be a part of a conversation of what's happening now," says Leigh of her inclusion in the Biennial. "This is like, the stuff of my dreams."