

Art in America

Isaac Julien: "A Whitney Biennial with No Heroes and No Villains"

By Emily Watlington

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Isaac Julien: *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, from his five-channel video installation, 32 minutes.

COURTESY THE ARTIST & VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON/VENICE/© 2022 ISAAC JULIEN

Can you tell an interesting story with no heroes, and no villains? The 2024 Whitney Biennial, "Even Better Than the Real Thing," sure tries. In this edition, you won't find the bold assertions, the grand gestures, or the finger pointing—in short, the controversy—that typically make Biennial headlines. The works on view—by 71 artists—invite empathy and contemplation more than anger or applause.

This year's edition is brimming with fragile materiality: soft materials are at odds with firm frames. Dala Nasser drapes fabric, dyed with iron-rich clay from the banks of the Abraham River, over a wooden armature. Suzanne Jackson dangles delicate sheets of acrylic paint from rods. Lotus L. Kang hangs unfixed film from an aluminum apparatus; the sheets take in light slowly over the show's duration. Jes Fan droops molten glass over an intricate lattice, where it hardens into blobs. And Carolyn Lazard fills a neo-Minimalist menagerie of mirrored medicine cabinets with Vaseline.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Carolyn Lazard: *Toilette*, 2024.

What explains this trend? The answer seems obvious: today, perhaps more than ever, fleshy realities are at odds with the strictures of daily life. This fact is made overt in an installation by Carmen Winant titled *The Last Safe Abortion* (2023), a grid of photographs documenting daily tasks of laborers in abortion clinics in the Midwest. The photographs, many shot when Roe was still the victor over Wade, now feel like a tragic time capsule. Bodily inhospitality is made explicit, too, in Demian DinéYazhi's neon sign that reads "we must stop imagining destruction... displacement + surveillance + genocide!" and so on. And two works—by Tourmaline and Kiyon Williams—commemorate Marsha P. Johnson, an activist who spoke out against assaults on Black and trans bodies.

But for the most part, you'll likely feel more called in than called out. Have a seat in a folding chair in front of Sharon Hayes's 80-minute video of Los Angeles LGBTQ elders, and you'll feel like you've joined the group session onscreen—a discussion of aging and sexuality, of how things have and have not changed. Prepare to be dazzled in Isaac Julien's installation, *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, about Dr. Albert C. Barnes's African art: the white, Philadelphia-based patron assembled one of the first US collections of works from the continent. Julien's enchanting video sidesteps hot-button conversations about repatriation and cultural appropriation, instead capturing the collection's crucial influence on the artists of the Harlem Renaissance. These works aren't trying to be divisive. And these artists, it seems clear, feel exhausted with the heroic and polemic that so often plague today's discourse, made partisan and corrosive by the argument machine that is social media.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Jes Fan: *Contrapposto*, 2023. PHOTO OLYMPIA SHANNON. ©JES FAN. COURTESY THE ARTIST; M+ MUSEUM, HONG KONG; EMPTY GALLERY, HONG KONG; AND ANDREW KREPS GALLERY, NEW YORK.

It is in that sphere of controversy and clicks that you'll find the bulk of the show's critics, who have bemoaned the absence of assertiveness. Various white men whose names happen to start with the letter "J" have called the show "tepid" (Jerry), "bland" (Jackson), and "low-risk, visually polite" (Jason). Meanwhile, 2 of the 3 jab Winant's work—ironically, the show's most confrontational contribution.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



Julia Phillips: *Nourisher*, 2022. © JULIA PHILLIPS. COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

The strongest voice in favor of a softer approach comes from within the exhibition: in the Hayes video, a queer elder—who came out as lesbian at age 68—is asked how her relationship to activism has changed as she has aged. She replies: “I don’t want to get arrested anymore,” then tells the story of having been pushed to the bottom of a riot pile while protesting with ACT UP. In hindsight, she says, “it was a privilege” to stick her neck out like that; now, she’s more fragile. And yet, as the video itself attests, her voice is still potent in this new form.

In a wall text that opens the Biennial, co-curators Chrissie Illes and Meg Onli write that they are “committed... to providing a space where difficult ideas can be engaged and considered.” There’s not one figurative painting (unless you count Maja Ruznic), and you won’t get much art here that’s digestible on Instagram. Nor will you see artists from marginalized groups asked to make their trauma legible, so that others might learn.

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Still, wall labels aren't always the best guides to help you wade through the nuance. You could easily walk away not knowing the depths of the moving story behind Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio's standout installation *Paloma Blanca Deja Volar / White Dove Let Us Fly* (2024). Its amber resin, poured over records produced by white activists, evoke "the complex relationship between privilege and solidarity." Speaking in broad strokes, the label refers to the amber as "a kind of archive," omitting the more specific amber associations the artist has named in past works—including a reference to a black scar left in the earth by a volcanic eruption in El Salvador. During the civil war, that scar, where the earth subsumes refuse the way Aparicio's amber does, became a kind of dumping ground, where bodies piled up—including that of the artist's half-sister.



Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio: *Paloma Blanca Deja Volar/White Dove Let Us Fly*, 2024. PHOTO NORA GOMEZ-STRAUSS

But complaining about wall labels only goes so far: good narration makes a difference, and yet, words will *always* fail when it comes to describing artworks speaking a more material language. What's more, the show's main theme—that friction between corporeal experience and oppressive norms—is, in the most literal sense, a material problem. Constantina Zavitsanos's *All the Time* (2019) shows why—at the subatomic level. In a soundtrack, the artist waxes poetic about quantum physics, explaining how our understanding of the material universe is all wrong. We often think about the material world as a zero-sum game: there are limited resources for which we must compete. But some things—like holograms, alongside which this work was initially shown—double when you divide them. Let that sink in: if you cut a hologram in half, you don't get half an image; you get two. "Love is holographic," the track continues—the more you give away, the more you have.

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Zavitsanos's artwork itself, if you pay close attention, is loving towards its viewers in a material way, too. The project started when the artist wanted to make a video that was accessible for their disabled community—for in disability as in holograms, "lack" is often actually a gain. There's no image, and the bass tops 100 hertz, making the sound haptic and vibrational. The words are transcribed via closed captions, and all this is accessed via one giant ramp. If you are sighted and hearing and ambulatory—or if you never really have to think about access—you might have missed all that. If that work wasn't speaking directly to you, you'll have to slow down in order to let it sink in.

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