The 2019 Whitney Biennial

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Kota Ezawa, still from National Anthem, 2018, single channel video with sound, image courtesy of the artist

The Whitney Biennial is famously the show that Americans love to hate. Perhaps because it is one of the nation’s oldest and most prestigious biennials, it is prey to every kind of disparagement. Unlike the fireworks generated from actual exhibits such as the 1989 AIDS Timeline by Group Material, Daniel Martinez’s buttons on preconceived notions of race in 1993, or the unexpected controversy over the Dana Schultz painting in 2017, this show is quieter. In fact, one of the immediate criticisms of this year’s biennial was that it was ‘too safe’. But I would argue that is not quite the case. Like a social media relationship, it’s ‘complicated’.
In 2019, instead of offering bombast, the curators have chosen works that are often personalised without losing any outrage or bite. What is controversial is the Whitney Board’s Vice-Chair, William B Kanders. Kanders owns the Safariland Group and is part-owner of the Clarus Corporation, companies that create the Sierra bullet and so-called ‘non-lethal’ tear gas that have been used against civilian populations in the Americas, the Middle East and North Africa. Due to this relationship, there have been ongoing demonstrations against the museum since November of 2018, and in December one of the artists, Chicago-based Michael Rakowitz, removed himself from the exhibition in protest.¹

But what about the remaining artists within the exhibition? While there are a number of artists from Los Angeles and New York City, co-curators Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta noted their desire to create visibility for lesser-known artists far from art centres. And they have done so. This Biennial is skewed towards young artists (seventy-five per cent are age forty or under), and the curators outline their reasons for that. Citing concerns that include the rise of right-wing politics, the environment, issues regarding gender, racism, equity and gentrification, Panetta simply says ‘we find ourselves at a uniquely trying moment for young Americans – and for young artists….’² The resulting exhibition exemplifies more than it amplifies these contemporary concerns, and most of the socio-political commentary (there is plenty) tends to be nuanced rather than declamatory. Aside from age, it is worth noting that we are seeing work from the most diverse set of artists the Whitney has ever shown.

With seventy-five artists and/or collectives, the 2019 Biennial stands out in interesting ways. For the first time, fifty per cent of the participants identify as female. While fifty-one of the participants describe New York City or its close environs as at least one of their residential bases, over fifteen per cent reside outside the USA – and that figure does not include those who were born abroad but now reside in the United States. The Whitney Museum of American Art (its full title) does seem to be finally recognising the ethnic and racial diversities that make up the country.


The first thing a viewer to this Biennial might notice is that there is a return to painting, to sculpture, and there are a surprising number of small, intimate pieces alongside large, heroic installations. The second is how often socio-political observations are filtered through personal experiences. If the first part sounds old-fashioned, the curators also note this as a part of our times as well. They state that in looking at studios and collectives throughout the United States and abroad, ‘[t]hese artists stake their claim to the current moment, as if to say I am here, making this now, with my own two hands’.\(^3\) Whether this attraction to handmade processes is a measure of the DIY movement among millennials and Generation Xers is unclear. It may be that technology for its own sake is no longer compelling for people who have grown up with Facebook, smartphones and YouTube.

On the top floor, three sculptures by Daniel Lind-Ramos from Puerto Rico stand out. Composed of fabric, spoons, mirrors, beads, tacks, plastic tubing, larger found objects, and more, they are reminiscent of 1960s assemblages (think Bruce Conner), but Lind-Ramos’s work is more deliberately polished. In Maria, Maria, the pieces of detritus are shaped into a traditional Madonna. While its very materials may recall the aftermath of the devastation Puerto Rico suffered from Hurricane Maria in 2017, and the United States’s subsequent scandalous lack of support, cynically or spiritually, its form suggests a turn towards faith.

This Whitney Biennial is full of other work that mixes the pleasure of process with ideas. Josh Kine’s assemblages of iconic American architecture under water are composed of photographs, LED lights and water pumps. The paintings here, with a few exceptions, are largely representational, varying wildly from Janiva Ellis’s large, funny, surreal and sci-fi extravaganza, titled Uh, Oh, Look Who Got Wet, to smaller, more sombre pieces such as Eddie Arroyo’s depictions of Little Haiti in Miami. Not that the large and heroic is ignored here: Nicole Eisenman’s enormous installation Procession takes up the entire sixth floor balcony. Consisting of many larger than life figures, it is baroque, inventive, scatological and funny. A parade of figures and objects, and made out of all sorts of material from burlap to resins, fibreglass, gold leaf, wax, concrete and more, it is comic and creepy. Visually amped up, it certainly illustrates the circus that defines US politics today, eliciting an easy attention that the more personal and politically targeted work avoids.

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Yet it is a weave of individual observations turned toward social realities and crises that is what marks most of the works. Jeffrey Gibson has three of his obsessively assembled and heraldic sculptures hung high on the fifth floor. *People Like Us* and *Stand Your Ground* are a gratifying mash-up of traditional craft, colour, texture and form, with a clear call to stop the government’s disastrous plan of opening up Native and public lands in Utah to private mining interests. Jeanette Mundt’s paintings of female gymnasts are simply celebratory. With an obvious love of material, they are also a nod to how we experience contemporary life through the media. Her images of the athletes Aly Raisman, Simone Biles and Laura Hernandez in action are painted in a series of very slightly skewed vertical strips. The group of six charcoal drawings by Christine Sun Kim look elegant from a distance, but on closer inspection turn out to be a schema of rage.
against the arrogance and prejudices of the hearing towards the deaf. Alexandra Bell created a compelling series of fifteen lithographs taken from the *Daily News*’s hyperbolic reporting on the ‘Central Park jogger’ in 1989. In sequence, these pieces tell of the infamously wrong case of racial profiling that was fuelled in part by Donald Trump when he was a private citizen in New York City. The story is compelling, but it is Bell’s painterly editing of each one and her use of lithography that make this piece of American history relevant and resonant for today.

While old-fashioned art processes are highlighted, media is still present. In one fell and very witty swoop, Illana Harris-Babou takes on colonialism, consumerism, aesthetics and justice for the descendants of African Americans in a series of videos, one of which is titled *Reparations Hardware*. Koto Ezawa’s *National Anthem* is one of his signature low-tech animations, this time of the NFL’s kneeling protests against racism and police brutality. A return to form for the artist, the work is powerful in its simplicity, projected as it is against an entire wall.
In contrast, *Gyres 1–3*, a set of videos by Ellie Ga, is visually rougher and more elegiac; it is filled with the kind of edits that recall experimental film and is laced with personal anecdote. In these works, the artist links the death of her mother, her brother’s interest in Bruce Chatwin’s *In Patagonia* with the gyres of garbage developing in the ocean. At one point, the viewer is taken to a beachcomber’s convention in a small coastal town that is described as ‘poor people’s oceanography’. Images of random sneakers, a toy frog and other rubbish that lands on the shore are shown in layered squares and rectangles juxtaposed with narration. Occasionally we see a human hand adjust an image. It is a slow reveal of an ecological crisis that intersects with human and humanitarian ones.

![Image of Gyres 1–3](image.png)

Ellie Ga, *Gyres 1–3*, 2019, two channel video with sound, image courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York

Years ago, the art critic Peter Schjeldahl noted that the plethora of biennials marking the latter years of the twentieth century is now supplanted by art fairs. In a world as mixed with money and status as the visual arts are, the distinction is sobering and it should give the public museum a slight edge. But, as if we didn’t know, the museum world’s financial connections can be as labyrinthine and ugly as the private. Just as museums are divesting from the Sackler family’s largesse accrued through marketing the drug OxyContin, the news that the Whitney Board Vice-Chair, William B Kanders, is owner of munitions companies came to light this past
November when it was discovered that Safariland, his company, manufactured and sold the tear gas used by the US government against refugees at the border last November.4

![](image)

Forensic Architecture and Praxis Films, video still from *Triple-Chaser*, 2019, high-definition video with colour and sound, 10:43 min, courtesy of Forensic Architecture

It is unclear at what point the museum and/or its curators decided to address these protests. But by late February, Forensic Architecture was part of the roster of participating artists and their *Triple-Chaser* is a direct response to Kanders’s business, and, as a consequence, his role in the museum. Founded by Eyal Weizman and based in Goldsmiths, University of London, Forensic Architecture ([https://forensic-architecture.org/](https://forensic-architecture.org/)) is a human rights research group, and by working with Praxis Films they have created the video, *Triple-Chaser*. In many ways, this work is a perfect example of what this particular biennial is doing. Eschewing the easy possibilities of either false catharsis or immobilisation by simply documenting past incidents, *Triple-Chaser* narrates a story of activism. It tells how Forensic Architecture created an algorithm that could identify when and where the use of Safariland teargas grenades is deployed. Forensic Architecture reached out to artists and activists worldwide, requesting thousands of photos in order to develop the artificial intelligence needed to ultimately and accurately identify Safariland products used against regular people through simple photos taken on site. In short, this is a ‘how-to’ video on collective action,

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using media wisely and connecting with others to get a job done. Whether this piece was an add-on, a response to the outcry against Kanders and the Whitney’s relationship to his philanthropy, is unclear, but it is within the curatorial approach Panetta and Hockley have taken throughout.

If you start at the top of the Whitney building and walk downstairs, as most people do, the exhibition ends with a single artist’s work on the tiny third floor gallery space: a row of photographs of rural America by Curran Hatleberg. It could be a colour update on WPA photographs from the 1930s, as it shows an America outside urban centres – people are shown smoking cigarettes, sitting on porches, playing (or fighting) in the streets. While it photographs poverty, it shows other images as well. Like the exhibition itself, there is little that is dramatic. It simply shows a country badly in need of repair.

Curran Hatleberg, *Untitled (Camaro)*, 2017, inkjet print, 19 × 23.5 in (48.3 × 59.7 cm), image courtesy of the artist and Higher Pictures, New York

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