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Whitney Biennial 2024

By Rachel Wetzler



Kiyan Williams, *Ruins of Empire II or The Earth Swallows the Master's House*, 2024, earth, steel, binder, flag. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From the 2024 Whitney Biennial. Photo: Audrey Wang.

The 2024 Whitney Biennial begins and ends with invocations of decay. Arrayed on paint-spattered plastic tarps tacked to the walls and floor of the lobby gallery are vaguely anthropomorphic assemblages constructed from detritus that Ser Serpas collects from the streets around her Brooklyn neighborhood: An upturned shopping cart and a disco ball adorn a vertically standing exercise bench; a fire hydrant reclines on a rusty utility cart; a yoga ball is precariously suspended within a battered metal scaffold. Wedged in one corner, a sectional seat with exposed plywood innards serves as the base for a threadbare American flag haphazardly tossed over its back as if it were a bit of dirty laundry. This emblem of empire in decline reappears in blunter form on the museum's sixth-floor

terrace, where Kiyah Williams erected a lopsided replica of the White House’s facade made out of dirt, an upside-down flag projecting from its crumbling portico. Exposed to the elements, the edifice will wear away over the course of the exhibition, the ruined monument seemingly sinking into the ground.



Ser Serpas, *taken through back entrances subtle fate matching matte thing soiled . . .*, 2024, found objects, plastic tarp, tape, oil paint. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From the 2024 Whitney Biennial. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Such is the overarching tone of this Biennial, largely defined by material precarity and conceptual obliqueness. With a few notable exceptions—among them Carmen Winant’s *The last safe abortion*, 2023, a wall of archival snapshots from the 1970s to the present depicting staff and volunteers at abortion clinics in the American South and Midwest as well as photos of these clinics shot by Winant herself following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*—themes and ideas are elliptically gestured toward, evoked through a gauzy veil. For his installation *Paloma Blanca Deja Volar/White Dove Let Us Fly*, 2024, Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio embedded an assortment of found objects along with copies of archival documents relating (per the wall text) to the actions of white activists in Central America in blocks of modified amber, which fragment, shift, and settle over time. Dala Nasser constructs a skeletal approximation of ancient ruins in *Adonis River*, 2023, draping bedsheets bearing charcoal rubbings of the Adonis Cave and Temple in Lebanon over spindly wooden columns. Cannupa Hanska Luger’s *Uñziwoslal Wašičuta*, 2024, draws on the form of a tepee, presented here as a cone of repurposed pink and orange crinoline suspended upside-down and anchored to ceramic horns on the floor by taut lengths of nylon cord. It is one of many works in the show that hangs down from the ceiling instead of sitting squarely on the floor or wall, as if refusing the stability of the ground.

The Biennial includes many formally and physically ambitious works, characterized by their large scale, unwieldy materials, and laborious production. Yet in aggregate, the effect is curiously muted, even sedate. Particularly given the relatively modest size of the exhibition itself, which includes 119 works by forty-five artists and collectives in the galleries (another thirty are included in the performance and film programs), the sardonic grandiosity of its title, “Even Better Than the Real Thing,” betrays a kind of confusion, or perhaps indecision, over what kind of aesthetic and theoretical terrain the show is really mapping. In the introductory wall text, the curators bafflingly cite AI and its reinscription of the real as a key point of reference for the exhibition, though only a

single work—Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst’s *xhairymutantx*, 2024—actually makes explicit reference to, let alone use of, such technology, and even this is presented in the galleries as conventional framed prints hanging on the wall. In fact, the show seems almost symptomatically avoidant of technology, instead implicitly holding up ancestral tradition, communal experience, and embodiment as bulwarks against its incursion into all facets of contemporary existence.

This is perhaps an odd thing to say about a show with so many exceptional—and exceptionally well-installed—moving-image works, a rarity in this type of sprawling survey. But even these almost uniformly look backward, probing the past as it refracts into the present. Isaac Julien’s five-channel film installation *Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)*, 2022, the title of which alludes to Chris Marker and Alain Resnais’s 1953 indictment of colonial plunder, reconstructs a dialogue between New Negro philosopher Alain Locke (played by actor André Holland) and art patron and collector Albert C. Barnes (Danny Huston) on African art and modernism, interwoven with scenes imagining an intimate encounter between Locke and the Harlem Renaissance sculptor Richmond Barthé (Devon Terrell). “There’s nothing more galvanizing,” Locke tells Barnes, “than the sense of a cultural past,” expressing a sentiment that doubles back onto Julien’s film in its recuperation of the queer relationships often omitted from histories of the Harlem Renaissance.



View of the 2024 Whitney Biennial. From left: Maja Ruznic, *Deep Calls to Deep*, 2023; Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Unjziwoslal Wašičuta*, 2024; Maja Ruznic, *The Past Awaiting the Future/Arrival of Drummers*, 2023. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich’s *Too Bright to See*, 2023–24, and Tourmaline’s *Pollinator*, 2022, are likewise devoted to revisiting the lives of intellectual and cultural forebears, paying homage to the negritude theorist Suzanne Césaire and the trans activist and Stonewall pioneer Marsha P. Johnson, respectively, while Sharon Hayes’s moving documentary *Ricerche: four*, 2024, a two-channel video presented amid a circle of mismatched chairs, comprises roundtable conversations with three groups of queer elders from different parts of the country (Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and rural Tennessee). The piece—the latest entry in a decade-long project—was inspired by Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1964 documentary *Comizi d’amore* (Love Meetings), for which the Italian director conducted interviews attempting to capture attitudes about sex and sexuality among a wide cross section of Italian society. In

contrast to Hayes's film, with its *vérité* approach, Diane Severin Nguyen's feature-length *In Her Time (Iris's Version)*, 2023–24, takes the form of a stylized mockumentary shot at the massive Hengdian World Studios, whose permanently installed film sets cover the gamut of Chinese historical epics, following an aspiring actress as she prepares for her breakout role in a period film about the 1937 Nanjing Massacre.

As the show's curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli acknowledge in the catalogue, the specter of the 1993 Biennial inevitably hangs over this one, not least in its prioritization of Black, brown, Indigenous, queer, and trans artists. But instead of offering an explicit politics of representation, the works here are often conspicuously withholding, self-evidently informed by (if not explicitly invoking) a lived experience of marginalized identity while resisting any expectation of clarity, fixity, or disclosure. In her essay, Iles cites the work of Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant, whose theories of opacity and the archipelagic are conceptual touchstones for the exhibition and, I suspect, many of its artists, evident in the overriding emphasis on strategies of withdrawal, illegibility, and obfuscation. (This is perhaps best exemplified by Demian DinéYazhi's now infamous flickering neon *we must stop imaging apocalypse/genocide + we must imagine liberation*, 2024, through which they smuggled in the message FREE PALESTINE under the noses of the curators.)



Diane Severin Nguyen, *In Her Time (Iris's Version)*, 2023–24, still from the HD video component (color, sound, 67 minutes) of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising ribbons, mattresses, pillows, sheets, and custom flooring.

The appeal of such strategies today is clear given the real physical and psychic risks of visibility, particularly for those whose bodies and identities are oppressively policed, scrutinized, and surveilled. Obfuscation and evasiveness can also be means of decentering the putatively universal museum subject, who is historically assumed to be white, instead acknowledging that some works have more to say to certain audiences than others. But at worst, this approach tips over into mere inscrutability, as is the case with several artists' contributions here. P. Staff's room-size installation *Afferent Nerves*, 2023, which bathes the gallery in sickly neon yellow light below an intermittently buzzing electrified net, for instance, and Carolyn Lazard's *Toilette*, 2024, a bland pseudo-Minimalist composition of identical mirrored medicine cabinets filled with Vaseline, are so formally reticent that the viewer has nowhere to go but the wall text, the works' meaning ironically fixed in their explanatory supplements.

But the results can also be exquisite: Take Charisse Pearlina Weston's *un- (anterior ellipse[s] as mangled container; or where edges meet to wedge and [un]moor)*, 2024, a large sheet of smoky gray glass suspended from steel wire at a menacing tilt, as if threatening to collapse onto the viewer below. Originally commissioned by the Queens Museum, the work was inspired by a proposal by members of the Congress of Racial Equality to jam the roads leading to the 1964 World's Fair, whose site is now occupied by the museum, with stalled cars, an impediment meant to signify the obstructive effects of white supremacy. Weston's sculpture takes this unrealized protest and distills it to its essence as a looming blockage or delay, the glass simultaneously presenting as a barrier, a shadow, and a mirror.



Lotus L. Kang, *In Cascades*, 2023–24, Super Joist, steel, hardware, tanned and unfixed film, sheet silicone, cast-aluminum kelp knots, cast-aluminum lotus root, spherical magnets. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. From the 2024 Whitney Biennial. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Equally striking is Lotus L. Kang's multipart installation *In Cascades*, 2023–24, comprising long rolls of unfixed photographic film suspended from exposed steel joists, their hazy abstractions mutating during the show's run as they are exposed to light, undergoing a process Kang likens to the tanning of skin. In contrast to the industrial heft of the structural steel, the floors are lined with tatami mats bearing delicate casts of lotus root, cabbage, and anchovies. The ensemble reads as a kind of hazy memory, familiar but out of reach. In an adjacent gallery, Jes Fan has transformed CAT scans of his organs and limbs into 3D-printed abstractions draped over metal armatures or eerily embedded into orifices in the gallery wall, at once radically exposing his body and withholding it from view. In works like these, opacity is less a communicative void than a point of entry, a prompt inducing in the viewer a kind of ranging contemplation that might productively depart from the artist's perspective or intent. But for all the show's emphasis on mutability and indeterminacy, the net effect in the galleries is often closed and airless, the works retreating into themselves instead of jostling against one another. This is less a "dissonant chorus," as the curators describe the ensemble, than a depleted one.