

frieze

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The Whitney Biennial's Quietude Shouldn't be Overlooked
By Terence Trouillot



Diane Severin Nguyen, *In Her Time (Iris's Version)*, 2023–24, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

With this year's Whitney Biennial already having been dismissed by many critics (*New Yorker*, *New York Times*, *Vulture*) as riskless, I felt hard-pressed to agree. It's an accusation that – for an exhibition which, historically, has been the target of tremendous rebuke and, in recent years, mired by unwelcome, and seemingly never-ending, controversy – feels somewhat pedantic, even tiresome. Yet, criticism with a capital 'C' appears to rear its ugly (albeit discerning) head with greater zeal at the Whitney Biennial – the longest-running exhibition dedicated to art in the US – than at any other large-scale exhibition on the North American art calendar. While many may disagree with this observation, to me the scale and severity of the biennial's media coverage feels disproportionate – especially when considering how much of what is written today falls under the rubric of 'art writing' (arguably a euphemism for 'moderate' art criticism).

Ultimately, much as I did in 2019 – another biennial deemed soft by critics (*The Art Newspaper*, *Artsy*, *Guardian*) – I feel inclined to defend this year's exhibition, 'Even Better Than the Real Thing', amid the opprobrium it's provoked. Co-curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli have transformed the Renzo Piano-designed, glitzy corporate fortress that has been home to the Whitney since 2017 into an environment that prioritizes carefully crafted exhibition design. The result is not always successful, but it's a far cry from the previous biennial's chock-a-block arrangement of works. This year's expertly curated edition avoids these all-too-common pitfalls to showcase a tremendous array of impressive and, yes, beautiful art.

Among them is a smattering of sculptures that deal directly with the body and the way language 'is being used politically [...] to restrict bodily autonomy', according to the curatorial statement. Julia Phillips's hauntingly beguiling ceramic casts of torsos (*Nourisher*, 2022, and *Mediator*, 2020), alongside a selection from her series 'Conception Drawings' (2020–21), together muse on the aesthetics and conditions of motherhood and pregnancy. Jes Fan's undulating and cavernous 3D-printed CAT scans of his body (e.g. *Cross Section (Right Leg Muscle III)*, 2023) and B. Ingrid Olson's installation including concave forms suggestive of body

parts (*Proto Coda, Index*, 2016–22) are both stunning and politically poignant, alluding to the precarity and invisibility of certain bodies promulgated by ableism and bigotry.

Another strength of the biennial is its focus on video art – a medium all-too-frequently sidelined in recent years – with a number of breathtaking works, including Isaac Julien’s five-channel opus *Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)* (2022) on the life of philosopher and educator Alain Locke; Ligia Lewis’s gritty dance film about Europe’s cultural imperialism in Latin America (*A Plot, A Scandal*, 2023); and Diane Severin Nguyen’s *In Her Time (Iris’s Version)* (2023–24), in which she follows an actress as she rehearses her role in a film about the Nanjing Massacre of 1937. I was most impressed by Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich’s *Too Bright to See* (2023–24), a lyrical film honouring the life and work of feminist thinker Suzanne Roussi-Césaire, whose writings proved integral to the Négritude movement in Martinique. The work explores the complex relationship between the erasure of Black women in history and the privileging of artistic anonymity. As actress Zita Hanrot, who plays Roussi-Césaire, states: ‘We are making a film about an artist who did not want to be remembered.’



Ser Serpas, taken through back entrances subtle fate matching matte thing soiled co fated birch and test one sacked box twenty something flying in the face of burning hard to forget time is dealing soft on myself its enticing cant be there for anything at all finding myself over lakeside prat fall buttercup symbol place in shambles waited till last thing i stall where did i go breath huff heavy forget this song the hell i see whither anon make it right girl for one nightly fuck this on site hurl back and forth my teeth keep staining astonished and sick breath now its fading maybe i will find another big milky peaches this trap its better, 2024, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; photograph: Audrey Wang

This is not to say that the show is entirely without its shortcomings. Dora Budor’s shaky video of New York’s Hudson Yards (*Lifelike*, 2024), revealing the dizzying effects of urban renewal and unchecked capitalism, was a little too on-the-nose for my taste, while Suzanne Jackson’s latest paintings of detritus frozen in acrylic gel (e.g., *Palimpsest Grit*, 2022–23), although commendable for their bold experimentation, did not feel entirely realized. Moreover, despite the accompanying literature purporting that the show investigates how artists are probing the realities of artificial intelligence, Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst’s *xhairymutantx* (2024) is the only firm example. The work is a text-to-image AI model trained to produce only strange versions of Herndon’s own image (a white female with red hair in a camo bodysuit), regardless of the prompts it is given. In addition to the two glossy prints on display (*xhairymutantx Embedding Study 2*, 2024), thousands more images are available to view online on the Whitney Museum’s Artport site, where anyone is encouraged to use the model. I typed in ‘James Baldwin eating a sandwich’ and it spat out an amusing illustration of the famed author in a camo blazer sporting a short, auburn bob. Yet, *xhairymutantx*’s attempts to complicate our understanding of self-determination and body autonomy within the digital realm merely scratch at the surface. It’s an interesting

work that leaves you wanting more. I can only hope that the exhibition's scheduled film and performance programme will delve deeper into the relationship between AI, our bodies and our sense of reality.

Where the exhibition does deliver on its promise, however, is in confronting the horrid legacies of transphobia and abuse towards marginalized groups by leveraging the works of queer and trans artist. In fact, each floor of the exhibition is centred around a work by a trans artist. On the sixth floor, for instance, P. Staff's *Afferent Nerves* (2023) – a neon yellow-lit room with a live electrical net hanging above – immediately greets you as you step out of the elevator. The same is true of Tourmaline's filmic ode to Marsha P. Johnson on the fifth floor (*Pollinator*, 2022) and on the third floor Pippa Garner's installation of notes and drawings in part detailing her transition (*Inventor's Office*, 2021–24). Occupying the first-floor gallery, Ser Serpas's installation, *taken through back entrances ...* (2024), comprises discarded materials she scavenged in Bushwick, New York. While not all these works need to be read through a trans lens, they offer up a space for these artists quietly to exercise their right to be seen on their own terms.



Demian DinéYazhi, *we must stop imagining apocalypse / genocide + we must imagine liberation*, 2024, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; photograph: Nora Gomez-Strauss

'Even Better Than the Real Thing', it's true, may not always present the most challenging works, especially for like-minded progressives who look to artists to shout from the rafters rather than carefully consider the issues that plague them. The problem that the Whitney Biennial now faces is that, instead of acting as a mandate for the 'best' in American contemporary art, it has become a mirror for the country's political climate that looks to present an accurate picture of the times we live in through the responses of artists. Yet, the role of soothsayer should surely fall neither to artist nor curator. That said, this year's biennial does seem to capture the precarity of the world we live in today. A not-so-subtle example of this is *we must stop imagining apocalypse/genocide + we must imagine liberation* (2024), a text-based neon work by poet and artist Demian DinéYazhi'. The sentences presented are inspired by Indigenous resistance movements and offer another message in disguise: flashing letters spelling out the phrase 'Free Palestine'. Although the work was made prior to the current war in Gaza, the piece speaks silently to recent reprimands against artistic expression in the wake of the conflict.

This show, for me, feels like a quiet rumination on the subject of privilege – specifically on who is allowed to hold space to share their ideas safely, irrespective of their political beliefs. Considering the insidious brand of McCarthyism that seems to plague cultural institutions all across the world at the moment, playing it relatively safe may be the only option for survival. A quiet

resilience amid the chaos, strife and injustice that surrounds us. As Roussi-Césaire proclaims in *Too Bright to See*: ‘When the storm comes, sugar cane bends.’