

# VULTURE

March 19, 2024

What to See and What to Skip at the Whitney Biennial  
By Jerry Saltz



Photo: Courtesy of Whitney Biennial 2024

The Whitney Biennial isn't what it used to be. Once, it was mainly for the inhabitants of that strange royal court we call the art world — for insiders, in other words. The past several Whitney Biennials have turned the tables. It is no longer a gathering of warring, incestuous tribes of gallerists and curators and hangers-on but an outward-facing event for everyone interested in art and culture and the issues that face humanity as a whole. The show isn't for people like me; it's for the public. These are the exhibition's contemporary values — for better and worse.

Underscoring the point is this Biennial's title, "Even Better Than the Real Thing." Named for a U2 song from 1991, it is a show gesturing at artificial intelligence that actually has very few works dealing with that hot topic. The show does address Gaza, climate change, abortion, and the continued effects of the pandemic. Every work gets ample room to do whatever it purports to be doing, but as a result, there's little optical pop or psychological nerve, as if a maximum of effort had been deployed for minimum effect. Nearly half of the 71 artists live or were born outside the U.S., yet all this diversity has somehow produced an underlying aesthetic that is familiar, predictable, and very safe.

As well made and well meaning as the art is, most of what you see could have been made in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s; the forms and styles are old. Only the subject matter is new. Almost despite itself, the Biennial also features excellent work that conveys new

meaning to the world, at least partly justifying the recent impulse to be less insular and academic. In all these ways, the Biennial is an agenda-driven snapshot of what art is today — the good, the bad, and the very bad.



Ser Serpas, taken through back entrances subtle fate matching matte thing soiled..., 2024. Photo: Audrey Wang

Ser Serpas's lobby installation features a ratty section of a couch with a soiled American flag. This is the Biennial at its best: beautiful, serious, experimental chaos.