

With the most visible face of the US being the authoritarian face of the American presidency, the current 2019 Whitney Biennial provides a refreshing counterweight to that oppressive fact. The curators embrace the vernacular, institutional critique, and ‘artist’s artists’, meaning those artists who are discussed within art world circles by the makers themselves for their dexterity and sense of purpose as artists. All the artists in the exhibition are American, unless otherwise noted.

The challenge to the public of sweeping exhibitions such as this one is that they require deep attention and involvement from the viewer. By contrast, many visitors seek a theme or narrative in their exhibitions. Finding none, rather than seeing the glamor, drama, and provocations of a show like the 2019 Whitney Biennial, some have left feeling uninspired or overwhelmed, with remarks like ‘there’s something undeniably flat about the 2019 show’ or ‘the Biennial feels surprisingly repetitive’ (Indrisek 2019; Solomon 2019). Such are the expectations of a biennial: either drawing together national or international representation, or presenting a snapshot of a moment.

Curated by Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta with support from Ramsey Kolber, and all curatorial staff at the museum, the exhibition includes 75 artists and collectives comprising painting, sculpture, photography, video and installation, as well as ambitious adjacent film and performance programs. A strong showing of black women and men, indigenous artists, Latinx artists, and LGBTQ+ artists helps support the sense of expansiveness. The curators effectively balance art by renowned artists including Kenyan-born, NYC-based Wangechi Mutu, Mexican-American artist James Luna (Payómkawichu/Ipi) who died in 2018, and New York-based Jeffrey Gibson (Choctaw/Cherokee), alongside art by self-taught artists, disabled artists, and artists working outside traditional centers.

Various groups of people found this exhibition controversial, including the museum staff, members of the public, and the exhibiting artists, who have been vocally opposed over a number of years to Warren Kanders’s role as Vice Chairman of the Board of Trustees at the Whitney, owing to his position as the CEO of Safariland, a manufacturer of tear gas (Black, Finlayson, and Haslett 2019). This chemical has been used against protesters by the US Border Patrol on migrants attempting to enter via the Mexican border, and on tribal members and those occupying with them at Standing Rock in North Dakota in 2016. Nevertheless, as artist Nicholas Galanin (Tlingit/Aleut) recently eloquently argued (2019), participation in such major museum venues as the Whitney provides access certain artists must pursue. While Galanin and seven other artists requested removal of their artworks from the Biennial during the exhibition, following the publication of an anti-Kanders manifesto, the controversial trustee’s midsummer departure from the board eliminated any continuing protest in that vein (Small 2019). Thankfully, Galanin’s work remained, as did the others who had requested the withdrawal. Galanin’s White Noise, American Prayer Rug of 2018 involves a tapestry with a television image in static mode, a fair representation of most
American responses to marginalized groups, particularly those utilizing prayer rugs from indigenous peoples to Muslims. This dense multicolor textile has a sculptural presence in the gallery on the wall because of its dimensionality. The legibility of the image and the suggestive symbolism of the title make it a potent expression of the challenges facing many peoples historically excluded from a society and culture.

The exhibition space deserves attention since the installation over several floors involved groupings of two to three artists in an area or room together. Occasionally, an artist would have a small or remote, individually designated area. Few entire galleries were dedicated to single artists. Even with the large number of artists on view, the curators succeeded in providing space – actual space – in the galleries. There is visual ‘breathing’ room to look at the art.

There are spaces dedicated to a single artist. Such is the case with Pat Phillips, a British-born, Louisiana-based artist whose own father was a corrections officer. He takes the situation of inequality related to labor, class and race, particularly the disproportionate incarceration and policing of brown and black people, as his subject. The Phillips installation is remarkable in curatorial terms. Pendant paintings – *The Farm* of 2018 and *Mandingo/Don’t Tread On Me* of 2018 – are displayed at either end of a large mural: *Untitled (Don’t Tread On Me)* of 2019, which has a real fence before it and draws the viewer into its cramped space. This massive painting is situated in front of a large window with views over the Hudson River, which should be psychologically relieving. Instead, the painting makes for a claustrophobic experience, adding to the subject matter of threat and intensity. It is a *tour de force* for the artist with intellectual and material support from the curators. In the painting, the artist combines references to the infamous Louisiana State Penitentiary, known as a place of cruelty particularly to black men. The prison site becomes symbolic in Phillips’ complex compositions of turbulence, danger, and labor. His site-specific installation belies his background as a graffiti artist with references to the bold forms of Philip Guston and the invention of Michael Ray Charles, coupled with the strength of Betye Saar, and the linear energy of Kaws. The content of tear gas reverberates in works such as this one meaningfully and (un)intentionally.

Another example of a single dedicated space that unexpectedly captivates in its subtle intensity is Argentine-born and Miami-based artist Agustina Woodgate’s *National Times* of 2016/2019. In this room installation, the artist situates a network of clocks that starts with a so-called master digital timepiece, which sends signals to interconnected slave analog clocks. She modified each analog clock with sandpaper under the hands to wipe away the clock face over time – to disappear it. The idea of vanishing numbers recalls the missing children from Argentina’s ‘Dirty War’ of 1976–83 and the *Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo). Those women helped recover their disappeared children through their insistence and persistent reappearance in front of the Presidential Palace. There is no campaign possible for the time lost to mechanistic drudgery evoked by Woodgate’s installation. Yet, her work subtly references all master/slave scenarios while the mechanistic arrangement of the clocks signals their role as distopian props, a fascinating contrast to the depressing but wholly sweet use of clocks by artists such as Félix González-Torres.

Other uses of dramatic spaces include the outside terrace where American artist Nicole Eisenman installed *Procession* of 2019, a quixotic multi-media grouping of several spectacular sculptural figures, some posed together in a parade, including one with visible flatulence. She is one of several artists who have taken the figure in contemporary art and defined ways to make it humorous, potent, and complicated all at once.

The tight, close view afforded to the art-historically inflected photographs of John Edmonds gives the viewer the opportunity to study and investigate them with care. In color and black
and white images, Edmonds focuses on the portrait and the still life. He portrays the glamorous and glorious in black life, beautifying brown and black-skinned people. He relies on Andres Serrano-like conventions, as the depicted figures push close to the picture plane in tightly framed compositions, but he also puts emphasis on the dominant positioning and status of the figure, always shown above the midlevel, which promotes the heroic. He accomplishes these things without sexualizing and eroticizing the black body in the way that Robert Mapplethorpe, for instance, does.

In the midst of other groupings, a particularly compelling aesthetic became more apparent simply because of the juxtaposition with the surrounding works or because of its unfamiliarity. That lack of awareness about disabled artist Marlon Mullen prompted a closer look. NIAD (Nurturing Independence through Artistic Development) Art Center, a progressive art studio in Richmond, California gives him opportunity and access to make art. He took art magazine covers and reconfigures them into his visual language, refining and modifying the visual image and typography – in small ways – to render them into entirely new images, even as they recall their original source. In Mullen’s vision, they become signposts and posters for the hustle and activity of modernity.

The exhibition included numerous delights and curiosities There were the conceptually powerful and beautiful paintings of the adjacent canvases by Eric N. Mack and Jennifer Packer. Korean-born, NYC-based photographer Heji Shin’s photographic series Baby emphasizes the unfiltered birth experience, which play off the intense gender drama of the communal black female experience in the adjacent works in the same gallery – paintings by Janiva Ellis and the sculptures of Simone Leigh. One of the most understated, yet memorable, set of works were Ilana Harris-Babou’s high-definition videos. As example, Human Design of 2019 displays the experience of high-end shopping and sourcing by spearing the kind of aspirational thinking/desires behind certain kinds of material culture. She contrasts the history of slavery and forced migration with the fantasy of ‘mock’ anthropologizing-curating of modern art and shopping. The imagery is often amusing, but her message is straightforward and accessible in targeting those impulses.

Since I found the exhibition designed with abundant choices, I am disappointed for those friends, acquaintances, and compatriots who deemed it ‘uninspired’ or ‘overwhelming’. With several compelling artists, I liked and learned and asked ‘how did they do that?’ many times. The curation helped draw out some of the artists’ individual themes through the juxtapositions, which, ultimately, is a rare talent. I found myself recalling exhibitions I had seen curated by Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor (1963–2019) as the relationship of the artworks would exceed the individual artistic statements. Moreover, I thought about the Tate Museum’s recent initiative with its 2019 Pierre Bonnard exhibition to invite the viewer to slow down. There was similar space in these galleries for contemplation. Again, in a complex and dense exhibition, that is not such an easy task.

References


This is a fascinating publication that draws attention to the framing of whiteness as the hegemonic normative practice in contemporary visual culture. The publication evolved out of a symposium that took place in 2017 at the Royal College of Art, co-organised by the book editor Daniel C. Blight and Art on the Underground. The symposium examined interdisciplinary works around race and white privilege, which drew contributions from visual practice, philosophy, sociology as well as politics. The publication sees these conversations extend into print. It includes an introductory essay from the editor that frames his thesis around the domination of whiteness and white privilege in visual culture and raises critical questions around the representation of race. This is followed by a careful selection of visual practice that draws from 19 bodies of work, which contest the politics of representation. These works are accompanied by concise explanatory texts. Alongside of this, there are five extended interviews, between the editor Blight, and leading writers and artists which locate and theoretically contextualise the selected art works.

The selected works use a number of different visual strategies and points of reference to examine and comment on both historical and contemporary visual representation of colour. This includes contributions from Broomberg and Chanarin (plates 1–2 and 27–28), Thomas (plates 12–15), and to some extent Patel (plates 43–46), who reframe and represent existing western images of whiteness, which freed from their original referents, that is the indent texts that anchor the images in specific locations, succeed in highlighting implicit power relations in normative representation of whiteness. Dizon and Le (plates 29–33), add their voice to this argument with the White Gaze project, that poetically repositions image and text, originally found in the National Geographic, to raise questions about the subjugation of the imperial gaze. These are successful examples through which a complicated point about the dominance of ‘whiteness’ in western visual culture is distilled.

Abdullah (plate 37) and Kranitz (plates 33–36) use self-portraiture to highlight the politics of representation. Having an awareness of the context of both these works is crucial in order to understand the intent of the work. In his self-portrait, artist Abdullah is dressed as, and performs as a white nationalist, defiant in his gaze to the camera. His face is mostly covered, a union jack is worn as a gang motif around his neck, the words on his T-shirt ‘Fuck off we are full’ are surrounded by the map of Australia. His portrait alludes to current draconian British and Australian immigration policies. In Kranitz’s self-portraits she enacts imagined