

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Ariella Budick, "Whitney Biennial: an anthology of young America," *Financial Times*, June 5, 2019



Visual Arts

Whitney Biennial: an anthology of young America

The New York event features a predominantly youthful cohort of artists — and their work is both serious and delightful



Eddie Arroyo, '5625 NE 2nd Ave, Miami, FL 33137' (2017)

Ariella Budick JUNE 5, 2019

For an up-to-the-minute blockbuster that confronts some of today's thorniest issues — race, class, gender, inequality — the Whitney's 2019 Biennial is unexpectedly lovely to look at. The kind of political virtue usually found in a museum tends to express itself in sterile conceptual installations with long wall labels that tell you what to think. This time, though, curators Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley remember that art doesn't have to be strident to be sharp — that it can be simultaneously serious and delightful.

Eddie Arroyo traces the transformation of his Miami neighbourhood, Little Haiti, through the microcosm of a single corner. For four years, he painted the same boxy, one-storey building from different angles and in changing light, a 21st-century version of Monet's cathedral. Unlike the immobile gothic façade at Rouen, though, Arroyo's subject kept evolving as he watched. The sequence opens with the Café Creole standing proudly on the corner, adorned with a mural of an officer in Napoleonic uniform. A dying sun bathes the scene in luminous reds and oranges. Soon the café's sign is gone beneath a layer of graffiti, then the mural, until the building finally reaches a state of whitewashed anonymity. Arroyo's landscapes record gentrification as a not-so-gradual process of brilliant colours fading to white.

Wangechi Mutu's seductive and cryptic "Sentinels" draw themes from a lifetime of collages and translate them into three dimensions. Her African Daphnes freeze mid-morph, with branches winding from necks and across torsos. It's hard to know whether we're witnessing the transformation of woman into tree, or the other way around. Maybe Mutu's creatures are an amalgam of different states and stories: Eve, the serpent and the Tree of Knowledge fused into a single writhing organism.

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Wangechi Mutu, 'Sentinel I' (2018)

These figments of colonialist nightmares — zombie Medusas! the jungle’s revenge! — beguile and destroy. A wall text tries to pin their meaning down, telling us that they “radicalize clichéd associations of nature as an eternally forgiving female-mother”. But Mother Nature has always been seen as capricious, exploding with volcanic rage even as she nurses seedlings into food. The genius of Mutu’s approach lies precisely in the flow of metaphor, the tension between meanings.

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Mutu and Arroyo are two of 75 participants in this youthful American anthology, where half the

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participants are women, more than half are people of colour, and three-quarters are under 40. It's a cohort interested in identity, but not in sloganeering. Much of the work here is subtle, thoughtful and meticulously engineered — even when its ingredients are culled from trash. These artists have also not forgotten their elders: Nari Ward, master of sly recuperation, adept in the alchemy of slippery

metaphors, is the show's absent muse. (An excellent retrospective at the New Museum closed soon after the Biennial opened.)

Daniel Lind-Ramos scavenges bits of debris near his home in Loíza, Puerto Rico, and reshapes it into symbolically freighted figures. A halo of studded rubber tubing transforms a coconut into the head of "Maria-Maria". Lind-Ramos swathes the saintly body in the ubiquitous blue tarps that FEMA delivered after Hurricane Maria devastated the island in 2017, killing thousands. Conflating the Virgin and her namesake storm into a shrine-like allegory, Lind-Ramos celebrates endurance and indicts neglect.

Joe Minter also repurposes the junk he finds in and around his Birmingham, Alabama home into splendid assemblages. The self-taught artist turns his training in construction and welding towards the creation of totems. Rusted chains, tools, licence plates, hard hats and stuffed animals find their way into poems put together in his front yard. Each is a chapter from an epic whose narrative remains obscure. Minter may be self-taught, but his art looks right at home in a museum where, at least for a while, the homemade aesthetic prevails.

One of the most invigorating qualities of this show is the way it celebrates craft, not as a flamboyantly obsessional end in itself, but as an American DIY tradition. Eric Mack, for instance, pays homage to the quilters of Gee's Bend, four generations of African-American women in rural Alabama who used faded, patched-up jeans, canvas work shirts and worn-out dresses to keep their families warm and enrich their homes with beauty. Mack stitches vintage silks, knits, prints and chiffons into a hanging banner, a symphony of diaphanous silks and pastel shades that he offers as a new American flag. Instead of Betsy Ross's Stars and Stripes, he would represent the nation with collective toil, memory, and a dash of fashion.

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Calvin Marcus, 'Los Angeles Painting' (2018)

The ghost of Robert Rauschenberg haunts this show: his omnivorousness, but also his rebuke to decorum. Tomashi Jackson's wall hangings could almost be excerpts from Rauschenberg's multi-decade "The ¼ Mile or Two Furlong Piece" (now on view at the Los Angeles County Museum). Both incorporate cast-offs, refer to personal histories, and seduce with bright blasts of colour. But Jackson's "Third Party Transfer and the Making of Central Park" lures us close and murmurs lessons in our ear. She merges the story of Seneca Village, a 19th-century African-American settlement that was obliterated to make room for Central Park, with contemporary practices of eminent domain and gentrification, embedding her outrage in the decorative surface of the work.

Brian Belott takes a different approach to old stuff: he stashes it in the freezer. A dark gallery contains three ominously lit supermarket chillers of the kind usually filled with cartons of ice cream. We can't make out what radiant remains of someone's life lurk behind the glass doors, encased in blocks of ice: rubber dog toys, perhaps, or bricks of modelling clay. Glowing quietly in their frigid caskets, these mysterious objects exert a magical power that matches absurdity with delight. Are they relics, repressed memories, or the evidence of a troubling history?

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Nicole Eisenman's 'The General' (2018) is one of the figures from her 'Procession'

The show reaches its apotheosis outdoors, where Nicole Eisenman's wild "Procession" struggles on, rain or shine. One huge, dark-skinned man hauls another, who prostrates himself on the bed of a square-wheeled wagon. A cymbal player rides on the back of a crawling slave. More humanoid figures trail behind, sprouting strange growths, effusions, ropes and sticks — a parade of the malformed but dogged. There's something oddly hopeful about this shambling spectacle, a sense that the journey is cruel and comical, but the destination clear.

To September 22, whitney.org