

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Dan Fox, "Whitney Biennial 2017," *Frieze*, March 14, 2017

## frieze

You'd almost miss one of the most salient moments of the 2017 Whitney Biennial. It happens on page 23 of the exhibition catalogue, during a conversation between Whitney Chief Curator Scott Rothkopf, and biennial curators Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks. Rothkopf reveals how Lew and Locks 'have proposed that, for the first time, all of the artists in the biennial are compensated for their participation.' Locks explains that 'it's a symbolic acknowledgement', an honorarium that 'isn't going to change anyone's life,' but one that's 'about putting your money where your mouth is.' Lew agrees: 'We want to acknowledge artists as people, as humans – to not just treat an artist as an abstraction, saying, "We want your work, but we're not going to deal with you as a person."' If you're an artist it's hardly news that museums don't often pay much (because who needs to eat when the exposure will be great for your career profile?). But better late than never. This is 2017, Official International Year of the Kleptocrat, and as the politicians and financiers further loosen the collars on their Donald J. Trump Signature Collection shirt-and-tie sets and crank tight the money-rack the rest of us are strapped to, the Whitney has made the right gesture at the right time. Opening one floor of the biennial is a large installation by the Occupy Museums group, part of their ongoing 'Debtfair' series which began in 2015 (Debtfair Whitney, 2017); amongst other elements, it includes a slideshow featuring testimonies from artists across the country describing the financial straits they are in, and what jobs they do to get by. This is the reality most US artists wake up to each day

Featuring the work of 63 artists and groups (including a film programme co-curated by Aily Nash), and the first to be held in the museum's now two-year-old Renzo Piano-designed premises in Manhattan's Meatpacking District, this edition of the Biennial does not arrive under a title nor does it trumpet an overarching theme. Yet it's impossible not to read it as a state-of-the-nation exegesis. Lew and Locks's participant list was made public just days after Trump won the US presidential election, and opened less than two months after he was inaugurated, making 2017 the best of times and the worst of times to open a Whitney Biennial. It would have been a political show whether the curators wanted it to be or not. Inequality, class, race, politics, identity: it's all there to be teased out if you want, but Lew and Locks have built an exhibition that is multivalent, personal, almost conversational. They have been mindful of representation (the show features a significant proportion of artists of colour, yet it is notable that this is still a fact we have to note) but open to what artists have been telling them rather than what they wanted to hear.

Spread across two floors of the museum, the Biennial benefits from fewer artists than the last edition (which included 103), and the room to breathe that it never really had in the

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Whitney's old, airless Marcel Breuer building uptown. Proportionally, the skew is to young artists, but nevertheless the range is from a 26-year-old (Casey Gollen, who works in collaboration with Victoria Sobel) to an 88-year-old (the indomitable Jo Baer). No medium or methodology dominates; this is not one of those biennials people are going to look back and remember as 'the video one', 'the abstract-sculpture-and-stand-up-comedy one' or whichever other fruits are in season that year. (That said, each painter in the show is given a generous amount of space, giving the impression that the biennial features a sizeable square footage of oil on canvas – I could count only 12 painters in total.) Medium specificity is not the conversation we have the luxury of enjoying this time around. This is the 'whatever works' biennial: whatever works best to articulate your position, your subjectivity, your relationship to others.

Bodies are everywhere in this show, either implied or represented directly. (For those on the left, marching in the streets alongside thousands of others has been one of the defining experiences of life in the past months and years in the US; that regular proximity can't help but resonate here.) Dana Schutz peoples her extraordinarily dynamic paintings with hefty, volumatic bodies that fill the canvas, whether depicted crammed into an elevator, punching and kicking each other (Fight in an Elevator, 2015) or laying dead in a coffin, as in her painting Open Casket (2016), based on a famous photograph of Emmett Till, an AfricanAmerican teenager beaten to death in 1955 having been accused of flirting with a white woman. Henry Taylor's suite of paintings (exhibited alongside photographs by Deana Lawson) are both scruffy and bold; emotive evocations of people cooking, looking at a horse in a field – or being shot dead in their car. People appear in Oto Gillen's mesmerising photographic slideshow of New Yorkers on the streets of Manhattan; details of hands, necks, faces, torsos captured, reportage-like and rendered in such a way as to appear to be from a future version of the city and themselves (New York, 2015–ongoing).

Tala Madani's tragicomic paintings show bodies in all their vulgarity and social insecurity: nightclub dance scenes in which desperate, narcissistic men admire their own shit as disco lights flash out of naked assholes ('Shitty Disco,' 2016). Anicka Yi goes deep into the body's biochemistry in her hypnotic 3D travelogue video The Flavour Genome, following a 'bioprospecting' trip through the Amazon jungle in search of 'designed chemical personas' that can be extracted from plant and animal life. Even where The Flavour Genome makes me wonder whether we need a moratorium on deadpan voiceovers straight out of the Chris Marker style manual, her striking images and narrative drag the viewer into a disturbing genesplicing of science with fiction.

Perhaps the biennial's most tin-eared moment is the one in which it attempts to bodys shock in the most literal way: Real Violence (2017) by Jordan Wolfson. (Cameron Rowland's Public Money, 2017, in which he persuades the Whitney to invest in a Social Impact Bond – schemes that invest private money in public services such as anti-recidivism programmes – also bothers me, although an expert in economic privatization might make an assessment better than I can.) Wolfson invites visitors to wear a VR headset and watch a simulation of him beating another man's head to a pulp on a city street corner. First Wolfson drops his victim to the ground with a baseball bat, then

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repeatedly stoves his face in with his feet, as a traditional Hebrew prayer is heard. I can guess why this pantomime snuff movie is included: it's easy for a show such as this to give the impression that all the artists have joined hands around the campfire, singing Kum-ba-yah, and it needs contrasts. I can guess how the Hebrew prayer and white victim can both complicate the reading of Wolfson's piece and directly nod to the horrific spike in anti-semitic violence across the US since the election. I get that it's necessary to be reminded that art is not always a moral good. That VR and videogames generate physical and moral dissonances, dissonances that expose how violence is, daily, palpably close at hand for many people, and for others just an abstraction. That men can be ghastly shitheads towards other human beings, that a certain type of man can beat another on the street and not immediately get shot by a cop. I get that Wolfson is most effective as an artist when needling taboos in ways that are almost sociopathically slippery. But in *Real Violence* his provocation flatlines as an expensive fairground ride produced for some American Psycho amusement park.

Next to Wolfson's VR headsets is an orchard created by Asad Raza, in which chatty hosts engage visitors in conversation about the trees in the gallery. This sociability is echoed throughout the show in Jessi Reaves' upholstered couches, benches and lamps, which appear in the museum's conference rooms, in a corner overlooking the Hudson River, and most effectively in rooms with paintings by Frances Stark and Carrie Moyer. Her sculptures – whether you read them as post-apocalypse salvage furniture, or delirious remixes of design history – give the body a moment to pause, take a load off and take it all in. From here you can sink into Moyer's technicolour abstractions, or tangle yourself in Stark's provocative, painted annotations to Ian Svenonius's 2015 book *Censorship Now!* Chemi Rosado-Seijo forges another type of conversation in *Salón-Sala-Salón* (*Classroom/Gallery/Classrom*, 2017); a gallery in the museum has been switched out with a classroom in a school across town on the Lower East Side. In Samara Golden's installation *The Meat Grinder's Iron Clothes* (2017), imaginary apartment interiors command views of the Hudson; using mirrors they appear to stretch above and below our heads to infinity points of luxury and exclusivity; future condominiums built, perhaps, with the tools and building methods incanted by Zarouhie Abdalian's audio piece on the terrace outside. Abdalian takes a language of labour from the construction sites beyond the museum that have transformed New York, baking them into language from antebellum sites in Louisiana and Massachussetts where previous iterations of the piece have been shown (*Chanson du ricochet*, 2017). Swinging back down to the museum lobby, Park McArthur has installed two large, brown highway road signs of the sort used to indicate a local heritage site, but minus any text. Titled *Another Word for Memory is Life* (2017), McArthur's signs absent heroic names from the institution, observing that history is constructed and controlled only by those whom we allow to direct us, whose authority we accept because their names appear on the marquee. There are always other routes to take.

Lew and Locks' biennial understands that life doesn't come at us in neat themed-group-show packages. Life doesn't 'deal with' or 'interrogate' or 'explore notions of' diddly-squat: life is scrappy, attractive, grubby, screwed-up, hopeful, desperate, ugly, unfair, unfathomable, provisional, celebratory, funny, heartbreaking, sarcastic, insulting,

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exclusionary, inclusive, sociable, violent, physical, cerebral. Which, at least in places, is what this show tells us so well.