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A SUPERB WHITNEY BIENNIAL, MARRED BY FLIMSY POLITICS

By Sebastian Smee



Maja Ruznic, *The Past Awaiting the Future/Arrival of Drummers*, 2023. Oil on linen, 99½ x 151½ in. (252.73 x 384.81 cm).

NEW YORK — In terms of persuasive art by grown-up artists, this year’s Whitney Biennial — the 81st iteration of this closely watched survey of contemporary art — may be the best in more than a decade. But that, frankly, is a low bar. Compared with previous editions, this show groans with good work. But it is also — true to form — about 50 percent dross.

What’s more, if you’re not completely sympathetic to its pro forma progressivism, you may come away less impressed by the art than alienated by its relentlessly right-on wall labels. These seem to have been generated from a dutiful checklist of issues that includes Indigenous rights, race, abortion, disabilities, ecological destruction, gentrification and gender fluidity. The issues are important, in many cases urgent. But their articulation in the work is, in most cases, feeble, perfunctory and completely illegible without the accompaniment of convoluted, brain-draining texts.

Some of these veer into self-parody. Carolyn Lazard’s medicine cabinets filled with Vaseline, we’re told, are the products of an “artistic practice [that] traces everyday encounters of Blackness, disability, and opacity, focusing on the daily acts of maintenance we hold in common, in and against the privatization of life itself.”

Didactics like these pervade the exhibition. It’s as if curators Chrissie Iles and Meg Onli can’t imagine looking at art without museum-supplied lenses designed to bend our perceptions toward social justice. But what if 1970s-style consciousness-raising is not why we came to the museum today? And what if models of the White House sinking

into the ground don't strike us as all that edgy?

The stars of the show, which is titled "Even Better Than the Real Thing," are video artists, painters and sculptors. Their works, which sprawl across two entire floors of the museum, spilling over into spaces on other floors, provoke reactions more visceral and psychological than preeningly ideological. They are by artists who grasp the weight of things. They're attentive to materials and dynamics and to the various ways in which objects and images can charge the spaces around them.

Isaac Julien's multi-screen video installation is reason enough on its own to see this biennial. Julien is a Brit who lives part of the year in California. His 31-minute film, "Once Again ... (Statues Never Die)," stars André Holland and Danny Huston and includes an appearance by the marvelous singer-songwriter Alice Smith.

As with "Lessons of the Hour," Julien's 2019 film about Frederick Douglass, the film unfolds in cubist fashion across multiple screens. It takes as its theme a dialogue between Alaine Locke, a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, and Albert Barnes, the intellectually curious but cantankerous founder of what is today Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation.

In just a few deft strokes (artistic intuition can be so efficient!), Julien synthesizes and distills a series of fraught and ongoing debates around European modernism, African art, colonialism and restitution. The editing and casting, the use of music, and Julien's poetic imagery all imbue his heady themes with a rich humanity, reeling in lofty ideas, linking them to desiring bodies and credible psychologies.

Julien's work is cinematic; it comes from a cleaner, more beautifully lighted universe. Ser Serpas, on the other hand, has created an installation that is tarnished, drab and bereft even of dignity, let alone favorable lighting. Serpas scavenges discarded mattresses, medicine balls, collapsible tent frames, old carpets and broken mirrors.

She has combined them into a sculptural environment laid out on a plastic tarp in a large gallery on the museum's entrance level. A few semi-inflated shiny balloon letters are dispersed on the floor. A mirrored disco ball perches atop an overturned shopping cart balanced on a piece of gym equipment.

What is this place? We could be standing in the far corner of a parking lot where the contents of an evicted person's basement have been arranged into a temporary encampment. Or perhaps we're looking at a stage set for Hamm and Clov in Samuel Beckett's "Endgame." ("It all happened without me. I don't know what's happened." Pause. "Do you know what's happened?")

It's not, in any case, an environment with great feng shui. But after a minute in Serpa's room, I found her wan ensemble beginning to shimmer with a splintered grace. The refuse, fastidiously — almost lyrically — arranged, took on the quiet charisma of a disgraced outlaw. Serpas made me think of the preciousness we project onto art, and the exorbitant levels of pride most of us require just to get through the day. She offers us a glimpse of what life might look like shorn of all that.

A vicious gale was blowing when I ventured outside onto the Whitney's fifth-floor terrace to see Torkwase Dyson's monumental abstract sculptures. Trying to stay

upright while circumambulating these tilted, towering forms induced vertigo. Dyson hopes visitors will touch and sit on these works, which combine smooth, painted wood with rough stones. I love her work's boldness and freedom. I only wished in that moment for a few handles.

I admired, too, the sculptures of Jes Fan, which are made from 3D-printed CT scans of the artist's knee, hip muscles and vertebrae. He combines these organic-looking forms with blobs of clear, handblown glass. Fan evokes the body by displacing it. B. Ingrid Olson and K.R.M. Mooney do something similar, Olson with immaculately crafted forms that are like containers for body parts, Mooney with fascinating wall sculptures made from steel electroplated with silver. Since steel and silver react to one another, the work's colors and textures change over time, like skin exposed to sun.

Lotus L. Kang also uses chemical reactions to evoke presence through absence. Kang's installation uses wide swaths of sensitized photographic film, which she thinks of as "skins," draping them over joists suspended from the ceiling so that they partition the room. They look like glossy Rothko paintings that subtly change as they react to the light. On the floor between these "screens," Kang has placed tatami mats and cast sculptures evoking various preserved vegetables. The resulting environment is charged with mystery, at once empty and full.

The show contains lots of ambitious, large-scale painting, some of it expressive and painterly, some tautly designed, cleanly executed. Mary Lovelace O'Neal's paintings are in the former category. The best of them, painted more than 40 years ago, was inspired by a sighting of whales off the coast of San Francisco. Active in the civil rights movement, Lovelace O'Neal has long made work in which racial politics were embedded, even when that work was abstract. But the whale sighting triggered a different kind of response. It prompted her to "imagine the tons and tons of water they [whales] must displace" when mating.

Hilarious thought — but also: yes, awesome! Her painting has its own roiling energy and bravado, taking pleasure in touch as much as color. I enjoyed, too, the work of Suzanne Jackson, a contemporary of Lovelace O'Neal. Devoid of traditional supports, Jackson's "paintings" are really sculptures made from paint, suspended from the ceiling like washing hung out to dry.

But the show's most beautiful paintings are by Maja Ruznic, who was born in Yugoslavia in 1983 and now lives in New Mexico. Charged with imperious melancholy, Ruznic's "Deep Calls to Deep" was inspired by the artist's childhood memory of living in an Austrian refugee camp after fleeing war in Bosnia. Its palette conjures the glowing dream world of Odilon Redon, but Redon's mysterious intimacies, transposed to a larger scale, become sublimely vertiginous.

The paintings of Mavis Pusey and Eamon Ore-Giron are more fastidiously choreographed. Pusey, who died in 2019, came to New York from Retreat, a small village in Jamaica, in her early 20s. Her brilliant compositions were inspired by the crowded, vertical energies of New York. As parts of the city fell into disrepair, Pusey found ways to suggest the tension between demolition and renewal.

The playful, abstract compositions of Ore-Giron, meanwhile, are constantly outfoxing an impulse to settle into symmetry. Ore-Giron, who is also a musician and DJ, treats

shifts in color and tone like musical scales, ascending and descending like walking bass lines in jazz. His designs draw on mid-century Latin American modernism, Incan jewelry and Peruvian textiles. For all their pulsing rhythms and vibrant colors, they retain an elegance that is strangely austere.

A lot of the rest of the show, as I said, is flimsily political. Iles and Onli hope their biennial will help us “come together even in a fractured time.” But their vision of “us” doesn’t stretch very far. The issue is not just the show’s predictable, preaching-to-the-converted politics. It’s that Iles and Onli want their exhibition to tap into “strategies of coping and healing.” This kind of therapeutic cant, which has lately taken hold in the art world, sounds benign. But it collides with the uncomfortable reality that many strands of social idealism have hardened into sticks with which to beat the “unreconstructed.”

If you think, as I do, that scolding, identity-based “activism” feeds a reactionary impulse toward populist authoritarianism (a dynamic epitomized by the changing usage of the term “woke” over the past decade), you might be less inclined to humor this Whitney Biennial.

But go anyway. Check it out. It features many wonderful artists, whose excellent work deserves to be seen on its own terms.