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ART REVIEW

Whitney Biennial Review: Still Protesting, but to What End?

The exhibition is filled with work expressing political and social grievances, but feels like it may be preaching to the converted.



Agustina Woodgate's 'National Times' (2016/2019) installation at the Biennial includes 40 analog 'slave clocks' PHOTO: JUSTIN LANE/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By Peter Plagens

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The latest Whitney Biennial's online guide features audio of many of the 75 individual artists and collectives talking about their work. Given the emphasis by curators Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley on emerging artists and first-time Biennial participants, and the culture's current hyper-politicized zeitgeist, it's not surprising that the 2019 edition of the American art world's most-argued-about event could well be the greatest—and most superbly installed—graduate thesis group show ever.

The above isn't as snarky as it sounds. It doesn't have much to do with the (to invoke the horribly out-of-fashion word favored by the late great art critic Clement Greenberg) *quality* of the art on view, which for such a rampantly expressionist ensemble is quite professional overall, even slick. It has more to do with veritable degree candidates answering an art professor who asks, "What's this piece all about,

anyway?” Agustina Woodgate, for example, says that she purchased and employed 40 big, round, analog “slave clocks” for her whole-room installation “National Times” (2016/2019) “because of the way they are named. I was shocked to find out that this terminology is being used so freely in the technology industry.”

The pervasiveness of artists’ explanations derives from the fact that the exhibition—although it comes nowhere near the *cri de coeur* of the 1993 Biennial in which Daniel J. Martinez proffered proof-of-admission buttons saying “I Can’t Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White”—consists largely of work expressing political and social grievances against racism, sexism, homophobia and, in what is sure to be one of the most talked-about works in show, weapons profiteering.



Kota Ezawa's 'National Anthem (Buffalo Bills)' is included in his video at the Whitney PHOTO: KOTA EZAWA/HAINES GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

Forensic Architecture calls itself “a research agency” that “undertake[s] advanced spatial and media investigations into cases of human rights violations.” It’s based at Goldsmiths, an arts and design part of the University of London, which gives it enough art credibility to qualify for the Biennial, and presumably enough Americans on its team to get it under the Whitney’s national umbrella. The agency’s main contribution to the Biennial is an 11-minute film, “Triple Chaser” (2019), concerning the use on civilian protesters of the eponymous tear-gas canister. The controversy re the Whitney is that the canister is manufactured under the aegis of the Safariland Group (the name a rhetorical crime in itself), whose CEO and majority stockholder is Warren B. Kandera, a vice chairman of the Whitney’s board of trustees.

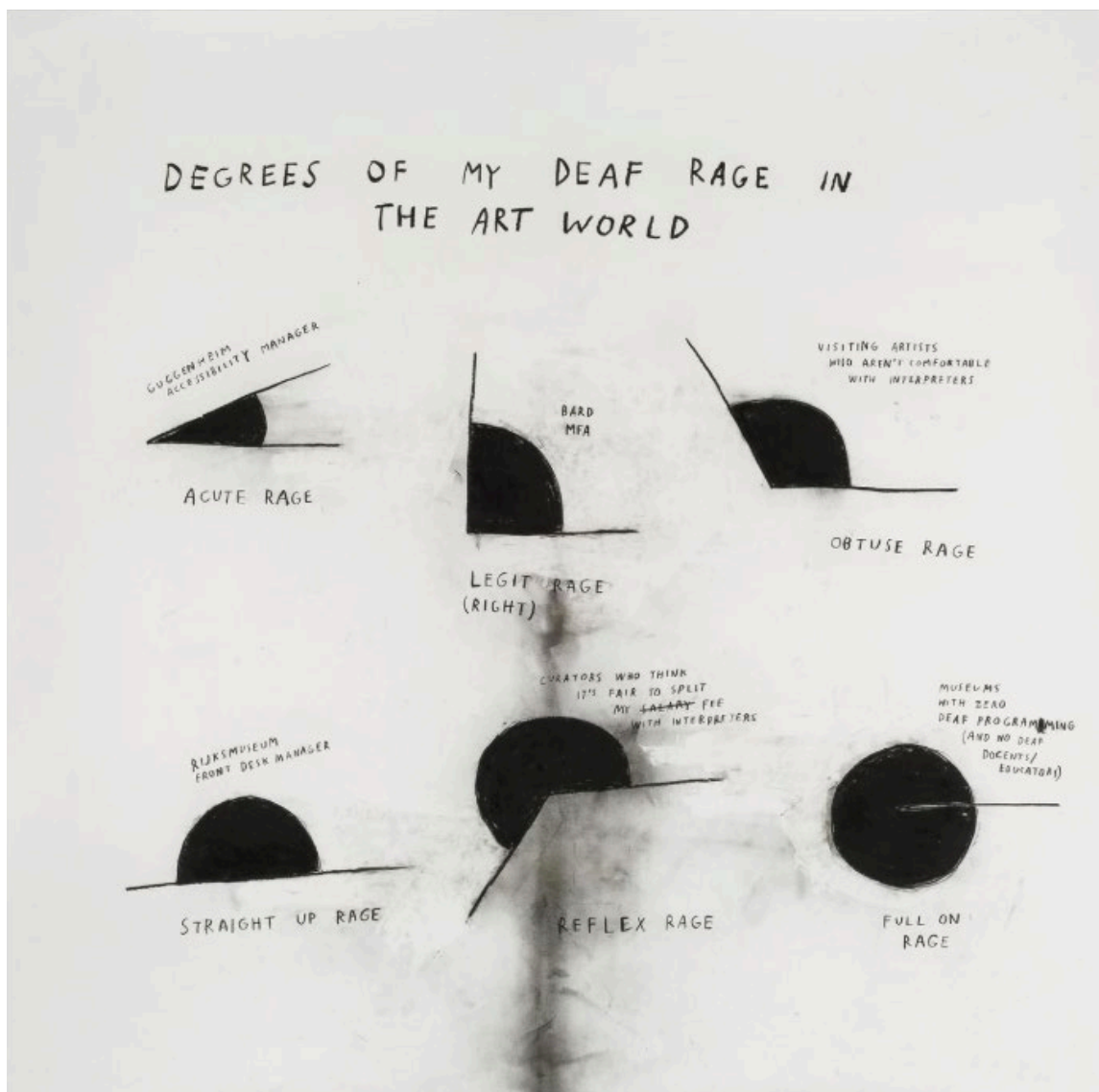
The film's explanation of the software used to ferret out the source of these weapons is fascinating, but "Triple Chaser" is too polished to constitute a full-fledged attack on the museum-military-industrial complex. With a voiceover by David Byrne, it demonstrates via sophisticated computer identification technology the profligate and cruel use of Triple Chasers, as well as some particularly deadly bullets made by another Kanders-involved entity. Mr. Kanders's membership on the board led about two-thirds of the Biennial's artists to demand his resignation from it, and one artist to withdraw from the exhibition.



Eddie Arroyo's '5825 NE 2nd Ave., Miami, FL 33137' (2016) PHOTO: EDDIE ARROYO/SPINELLO PROJECTS, MIAMI

Other works of protest include Kota Ezawa's "National Anthem" (2018), a large projection of softly animated watercolors concerning professional football player Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the customary pregame "Star-Spangled Banner"; Christine Sun Kim's adroitly semi-messy, semi-funny diagram drawings displaying the "deaf rage" she feels about the insensitivity of the hearing world; and Pat Phillips's giant mural, "Untitled (Don't Tread on Me)" (2019), which is about guns, racism and yahoo conservatism down in Louisiana, where the U.K.-born artist now lives.

In this, the first Biennial whose organization and fruition have taken place entirely since Donald Trump became president, the majority of artists have a beef, express or implied, of one sort or another. Nothing wrong with that, but it does raise the perennial question of whether those in the cutting-edge precincts of the art world are fecklessly preaching to the converted, and whether the art world—more or less aligned with the left—is doing anything to actually move the sociopolitical needle in a progressive direction.



Christine Sun Kim's 'Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World' (2018) PHOTO: CHRISTINE SUN KIM/WHITE SPACE, BEIJING

The Biennial's elegant anger (the former mitigating the latter, and the latter blunting the former) is both capped and contradicted by Nicole Eisenman's morbidly hilarious, inchoate bleat, "Procession" (2019)—a huge sculptural parade of 10 grotesque figures, trudging or riding or being carried along, installed outdoors on a Whitney roof. A cart in this mutant parade sports a bumper sticker saying "HOW'S MY SCULPTING? CALL 1-800-EAT-SHIT." The work is probably best seen, as it was during the press preview, in a cold, drizzling rain.

There are, of course, notable exceptions to the show's general vibe of a raised fist in an opera glove. One occupies a whole first-floor lobby gallery devoted to the stately sculpture (abstract, albeit with allusions to 1930s clothing and architecture) of the Chicago artist Diane Simpson. At 88, she's the show's most senior participant. The tender, unpretentious and modestly scaled paintings of Eddie Arroyo are another. In sequence, they show the poignant metamorphosis from vibrancy to desolation to possible renewal of a neighborhood café in Miami's Little Haiti district.



Nicole Eisenman's 'The General' (2018) is included as part of her larger 'Procession' (2019) work PHOTO: NICOLE EISENMAN/SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS

Perhaps the art of Ms. Simpson and Mr. Arroyo are what the curators had in mind when they state in the press materials, “While we might have expected to find work that was more strident in tone given the difficulties and instabilities of the times we are living in, the art we encountered continues to put forth a deliberate sense of forward-looking optimism.” In a few examples, yes. More would have been better.

—*Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.*

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