

VULTURE

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The New Whitney Biennial Made Me See Art History in a New Way

By Jerry Saltz



Photo: Courtesy the artist; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects / © Nicole Eisenman

First, massive congratulations to the Whitney. Even with long, flat patches of overly well-behaved work, a strange visual monotony that makes this show predictable (the prior iteration was more optically alive), generally weak painting, and collage and assemblage far too beholden to Robert Rauschenberg, this Biennial has as many as 15 standouts — which, judging by past versions, is a lot! Breakthroughs abound. Over half of the 75 participants are women, and over half are artists of color. Amen. Skeptics and cynics who say these demographics are achieved by good little humanist curators checking boxes to show how woke they are will be thrilled to learn what has always been obvious: Having an exhibition reflect the world this way makes the show better. This Bienni-

al's spacious installations, which unfold easily and bloom into almost solo presentations that then strike up interesting conversations with nearby work, makes it better still.

The show is also young. Of the 75 artists, almost 75 percent are under 40; 20 of them are under 33. The curators, Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta, are 35 and 46, respectively. Together, they have brought to boil an idea that's been bubbling in front of us for a long time: Subject matter is as important a formal feature of art as form itself as a primary carrier of change and newness. My wife, Roberta Smith, boils it down to "Subject matter is the new form, good and bad." Look carefully at Carissa Rodriguez's handsome silent film of tony interiors and sculptures by Constantin Brancusi as it morphs into a filmic Louise Lawler exploration of various rich collectors who own editions of the same Sherrie Levine–appropriated Brancusi sculpture; *The Maid*, as the work is titled, becomes riveting in its insinuation of cookie-cutter collector taste and what goes into maintaining this system of wealth and accumulation. Elle Pérez's small color photograph of a person with black eyes showing a red scar on their neck spotlights someone who has just had their Adam's apple removed in sex-reassignment surgery. And I have to say that *White Noise, American Prayer Rug* — a large, seemingly abstract wool-and-cotton work by Nicholas Galanin, an artist of Tlingit/Aleut and non-Native ancestry — nails the malign aberrations of what's happening with whiteness in America as well as what all information turns into right now, as the ice near Galanin's Alaska melts. This piece could fly over the White House. Over and over, subject matter like this melds with structure, surface, and form in ways that require very little explanation.

Yet for a Biennial with so much diversity in who is being shown, there's an enervating lack of formal innovation, as if the curators couldn't take those kinds of formal chances. As a result, sometimes a whole room fizzles. A number of inclusions are so generic and proper they become placeholders. Often, though, formally non-daring works breathe quiet fire and seethe. While we used to believe art history was a progression of one ism and style to the next, artists are now inhabiting the beautiful ruins of the art of the past 125 years — not to mention the glories of 50 centuries of art before that — and are making new things with old tropes. They dance on teleology's grave, using the canon and previous art willy-nilly as material, fodder, form, information, and tools to make their own work. Call it "sustainable aesthetics." This isn't being done in coolly self-conscious or ironic postmodern ways, and it isn't just pastiche that comments on or criticizes earlier art. It's not art meant as an illustration of theory or as aesthetic gamesmanship only. It may even signal a thankful waning of the 50-year fetishization of Duchamp and Warhol (one can only hope). Artists' free-ranging in the fabulous scrap heap of visual culture isn't new; what's new here is the passionate embrace of processes they're using to embed new subjects into known genres, styles, and techniques. This points beyond the Biennial to a wider path forward and away from toeing the line of progress.

Thus all the formal echoes of Rauschenberg and the dematerializing of the art object of post-minimalist sculpture; Jessica Stockholder and Cady Noland's notions of object-based installation; and numerous references to Pictures artists like Gretchen Bender, Sherrie Levine, and Cindy Sherman. There are even a couple of archaic tool-makers to push the clock all the way back. Video and film follow closely in either classic documentary style or the fictive tropes of Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Laura Poitras, Steve McQueen, and many others. When the art here works, it isn't 95 percent reliant on obscurant wall labels. It's enough that I left this Biennial hopeful about seeing new ideas

of the poetic and subjective.

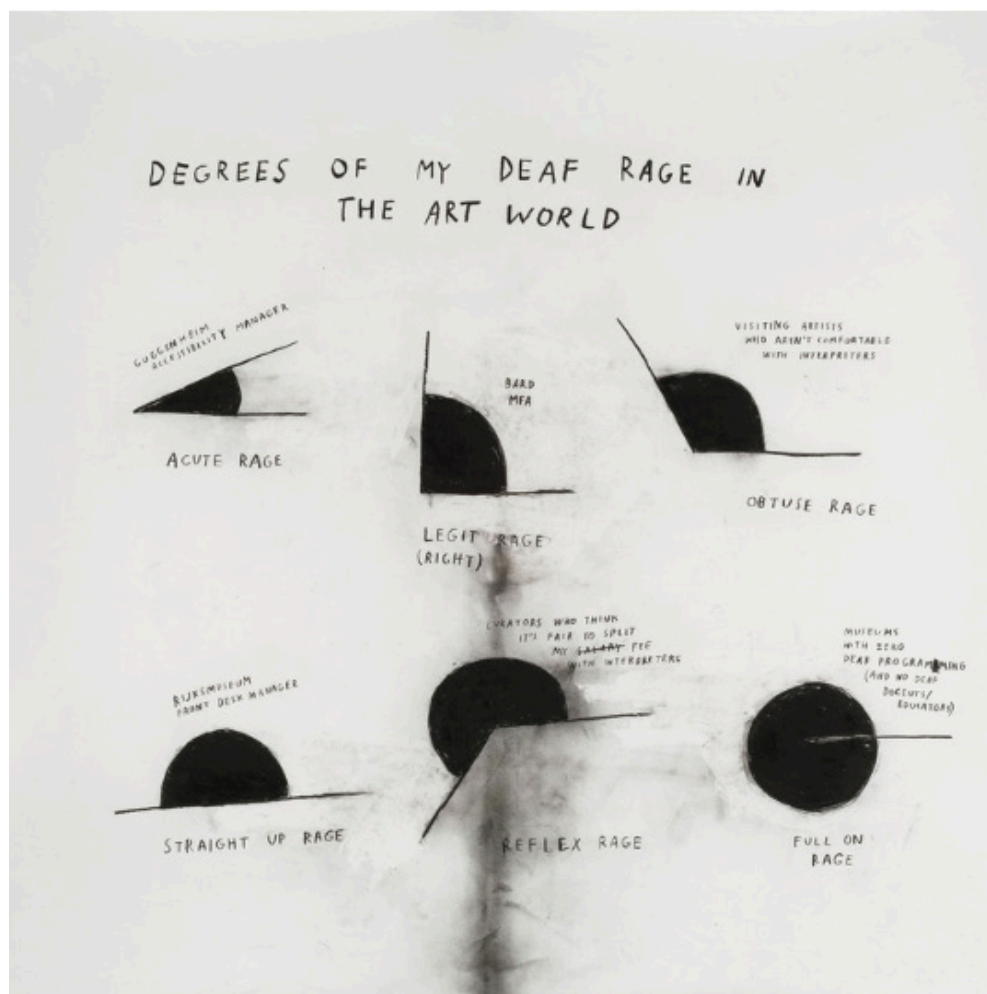


Photo: Courtesy the artist and White Space, Beijing

If you want another kind of blasting indictment, look no further than Christine Sun Kim’s affecting six-part exploration of her own “deaf rage.” Formally, the work resembles large-scale Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner, or Richard Serra charcoal drawings, but Kim uses her graphs and words to record degrees of her fury — from “acute rage” to “legit rage” to “full on rage” — at there being no interpreters at meetings and fake interpreters on TV, at her family not learning sign language, at fast-food cashiers, at airplane movies without captions, at Uber drivers’ calling rather than texting, and so much more that your heart will break. It makes you want a requirement forcing all public schools to teach students at least 150 words of sign language.

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