

HYPERALLERGIC

The Multifarious Feminism of the Whitney Biennial

Through its feminist contributions, the exhibition offers a window onto some of our most pressing cultural concerns, as well as our shortcomings.

By Anne Swartz
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Could we consider the 2017 Whitney Biennial a feminist exhibition? Twenty-five of the 63 artists in the show are women. There are additional women in the participating collectives and more exhibitors who are gender fluid. The percentage isn't as high as in 2010, when there were more women than men in the show, but certainly better than in 2014, when women made up only 32%. Even when they haven't been included, feminists have played a critical role in the biennial, critiquing the show for its lack of diversity. Groups such as the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee and the Guerrilla Girls have protested the exhibition over the decades.

The versions of feminism on display in the current biennial are incredibly rich and varied. Among the most beguiling and subtly transfixing are the digital interventions of Porpentine Charity Heartscape. In her seven web-based games, installed on desktop computers in a small, darkened room, viewers encounter text-based questions and worlds that prompt emotionally manipulated responses, leaving us either unnerved or enthralled. In one game, you feel your anxiety rise as the empty, dark intervals seem to lengthen between text bursts about the isolation of a hospital stay.

The biennial also features works by several queer artists — Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, Carrie Moyer, and Ulrike Müller — associated with the LTTR Group (the acronym originally stood for “Lesbians to the Rescue,” then changed to “Listen Translate Translate Record,” and then just became their collective moniker). The LTTR Group is a genderqueer collective founded in 2001; it produced an annual feminist art journal for five years, changing its name and editorial staff with each issue. At the Whitney, the Austrian-born Müller has contributed a wool rug with a black cat in a field of geometric designs; the feline as a wry, lesbian pussy joke takes on broader implications in the politicized milieu of 2017, when the pink pussy hat became the *de rigueur* fashion statement for the January Women's March in response to a statement by our now president.

Müller also has a set of small abstract paintings on paper with some transparency, in dialogue with densely opaque enameled paintings installed in a nearby hallway. Though there are color and shape differences between the two groups, the forms are consistently simple, curvy, and gorgeous. Moyer has filled a room with large acrylic-on-canvas paintings in her signature butterfly and nonobjective compositions. Recalling Color Field painting, the works suggest luxurious, diaphanous curtains featuring super sexy, psychedelic, even tender forms, with occasional accents of glitter. Abstraction can be a strong vehicle for feminism, and has been recognized as such since the beginning of the second wave of feminist art. Müller taps into this by combining a strong and potent color sensibility with an undoing of the harsh and drastic modernist ideogram; she adds flair and drama that earlier modern artists would never have allowed. Moyer's dense surfaces recall surrealist spaces, but rendered as abundant, decorative spreads and sprays.



Works by Carrie Moyer in the 2017 Whitney Biennial (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic)

Meanwhile, Dupuy-Spencer probes the present more explicitly. While many visitors seem to gravitate toward her depiction of a Trump rally, I was mesmerized by her pencil drawing titled “Matriarchs of the Hudson Valley (1980s-90s)” (2016), which looks like an update of a Sylvia Sleigh painting. Here, Dupuy-Spencer glorifies a homey, soft world of women, a sharp contrast to the masculine domain of the nearby and much larger oil painting “Veteran’s Day” (2016). In the latter, she interrupts the femme associations of the flowered yellow wallpaper by showcasing a framed photograph of soldiers in salute, as well as a framed newspaper clipping from which Cassius Clay peers out — with volumes by Lorca, Lorde, and Sontag pictured on the bookshelf, for further contrast.

An intersectional critique of how sexuality and race connect with gender comes into play in the work of several artists in the biennial. Like Dupuy-Spencer, the Latinx artist Aliza Nisenbaum works in an expressive, figurative style. Nisenbaum’s paintings are clearly informed by a knowledge of recent developments in her medium; among other references, they recall for me Sleigh’s work and the decorative motifs in the background of Joyce Kozloff’s art, as seen similarly in “La Talverita, Sunday Morning NY Times” (2016). Nisenbaum’s “MOIA’s NYC Women’s Cabinet” (2016) locates her immigrant sitters in a composition which draws upon the long tradition of group portraiture, a format historically reserved for the elite. Nisenbaum’s women dominate the painted space, and she emphasizes their individual beauty, collective strength, and social potency and vibrancy as a group, bolstered by colors and patterns. Her brand of feminist art offers a reprieve from the often harsh realities of immigrant life.

In another gallery, three video monitors display pieces of a multiyear project, *Liquor Store Theatre*, by Detroit-based artist and choreographer Maya Stovall. Three African American women dancers, including Stovall, make slow, balletic movements on sidewalks in front of various liquor stores. Under brightly lit signage, the artist intermittently interviews residents about life in Detroit. Her portraits of the gritty urban landscape are marked by the bustle of its residents’ everyday movements; the liquor stores are loci of these communities. Stovall heightens, brightens, and saturates the colors to draw out beauty from these otherwise unremarkable settings.

Deana Lawson’s photographs have long been a personal favorite. She crafts highly determined situations and places figures in elaborately arranged environments. In “Ringbearer” (2016), a grandmotherly figure sits in an interior space next to a standing young boy, who holds a heart-shaped ring pillow. “Signs” (2016) moves outside to show a group of four shirtless, muscled young men flashing hand gestures resembling gang signs. In her work, Lawson looks at the black body and the life of the black family. I’m particularly fascinated by the way she achieves such an exquisite intensity and range of melanin tones in a medium that has, for most of its history, been antagonistic to black and brown skin.

In the Whitney’s lobby and on its fifth floor, African American filmmaker Cauleen Smith has hung a set of 16 banners from the ceiling. Catalyzed by videos of police shootings, Smith put illustrative but cryptic symbols — showing cameras, pencils, microphones, and eight balls — on one side and sayings on the other. The latter read: “I’m so black that I blind you,” “No wonder I go under,” and “You don’t hear me though,” among other messages. Like Barbara Kruger decades before her, Smith keeps the subject and object in a shifting relationship. Her phrasings perpetuate ambiguity for the viewer about how the action is to be received.



Detail of Cauleen Smith’s “In the Wake” (2017) banners (photo by Benjamin Sutton/Hyperallergic)

In a biennial filled with such multifarious feminism, it's unfortunate that the most discussed work has been Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till's murdered body, based on photographs from his open-casket wake in 1955. Schutz, who is white, is considered a feminist artist for her painterly focus on the oft-dismembered or disfigured body, calls herself a feminist, and has been at the center of a dialogue about feminist painting for more than a decade. But what concerns me about her particular brand of white feminism here is that she's making a spectacle of the body of a black boy — who was murdered due to the lies of a white woman — in order to aggrandize her artistic mission. Her treatment of Till's horror is superficial as she crudely renders his mangled face as an impastoed clump of paint. It's gimmicky and bespeaks her own lack of self-awareness.

Feminist art speaks volumes about gender, sexuality, the situation of the body in society, and how those identities and issues intersect with race, class, ability or disability, and other realities. In this way, the 2017 Whitney Biennial offers a window onto some of our most pressing cultural concerns, as well as our shortcomings. There are other important feminist artists who have work in the show, such as Anicka Yi and Beatriz Cortez, and though there could be more, it's significant that so many are included. In 2005, artist and critic Mira Schor aptly wrote: "Perhaps the most important political act I perform is to identify myself publicly as a feminist." The women in the biennial proclaim their own feminisms artistically and publicly; in today's political climate, that feels more important than ever.

The 2017 Whitney Biennial continues at the Whitney Museum (99 Gansevoort Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through June 11.