

An intoxicating Whitney Biennial bets big on abstraction, identity and super-sharp video

In the planning stage since 2019, when the world was a very different place, the 80th Whitney Biennial will run until 6 September 2022



From left to right: Charles Ray, *Burger*, 2021; *Jeff*, 2021; *Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall*, 2021. *Photograph by Ron Amstutz*

The picking, planning and prep work for the 80th Whitney Biennial started back in 2019, in the ‘before times’. Before the Covid-19 pandemic took hold and before the murder of George Floyd by an on-duty police officer. And it returns with a land war in Europe being fought on the streets and on social media, a Twitter storm of blood and dust. Disorientation is now run of the mill. And if you’re looking for order or solace, a clamorous group survey of contemporary American art is not the place to find it. Nor should it be.

Curated by the Whitney’s David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards, and featuring the work of 63 deliberately diverse artists – mostly emerging, a handful established and a few dead – the latest biennial is tagged ‘Quiet as it’s Kept’, a title taken from a 1960s album by jazz drummer Max Roach, and a phrase picked up by Toni Morrison. It suggests the telling of stories previously hidden or repressed, though evidence of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement is limited. (The curators insist, though, that the relationships and dealings with their chosen artists, started IRL, deepened on Zoom as they were engulfed by threat and calamity.) There is also little that addresses the climate crisis. The politics here – explicit and abstracted – are mostly of identity and belonging.

The staging, though, does speak loudly of its moment. The show is set over two floors of the gallery, the lower floor flooded with light, pattern, colour, texture, textiles, or what might be textiles. There are no internal walls, just ‘provisional structures’. It feels at once composed and strewn with an improvised rhythm, about cumulative effect as much as one-on-one quiet contemplation.

The curators say they have not organised the show in themes but followed a series of ‘hunches’, and the hunch here favours the abstract and conceptual, and a variety of forms. Edwards says the show is about the state of contemporary art-making in America and there is no sign of the figurative fightback here, as much as the commercial galleries might be pushing for one. There is though sculpture, hangings, banners, readymades, photography, beadwork and the ‘crafted’, as well as images generated by gaming tech, and many of the artists’ represented work in multiple forms.

Duane Linklater’s hanging tepee covers somehow anchor the space and set the tone, while Alejandro Morales’ Juárez, a series of hanging magnifying keychains, each containing a slide of the artist’s hometown of Ciudad Juárez, is the closest the show gets to playful.

There are stories here, even if they take a bit of digging and background checks to unearth. Kitchen, as the name suggests, is a translucent kitchen with counters set 5ft 9in above the ground, the average height of the American man. It has a touch of the Do Ho Suhs about it but it is also an arresting commentary on disability as a design problem. The artist, Emily Barker, uses a wheelchair. Sable Elyse Smith’s A Clockwork, meanwhile, is a miniature Ferris wheel or a giant desk toy for Darth Vader, wheeling blackened prison furniture.

A floor up is a deathly black, Vader-friendly labyrinth of mostly darkened rooms, mostly housing video art – video’s centre-staging is another curatorial hunch – much of it almost straight ahead documentary. The contrast with the air and light of the room below suggests polarisation perhaps, or wild collective mood swings from optimism to despair.

A standout is In Your Eyes Will Be an Empty World by the Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco. The piece is mostly drone footage of Hart Island, New York City’s ‘potter’s field’. In 2020 unclaimed Covid-19 victims were buried here in mass graves. From above, the island looks overgrown and abandoned, full of fallen, forlorn ruins and struggling nature. Fusco drifts around the island in a rowboat, an act of remembrance and tribute. The piece is sad, haunting, elegiac, and immediate but it also alerts you to the state of mechanical reproduction in contemporary video art. The screen is large, colours pop, definition is ultra-sharp. There is little in the way of grain or texture, pixelation or flux. It’s not a good or bad thing but it is a choice. And in this warren of screening rooms, every screen, whatever the subject matter, whatever the story being told, has that same bright, sharpness. It starts to feel like a multiplex for the non-committal, a place of constant distraction rather than sharp focus.

Whitney’s biennials are pretty much guaranteed to generate controversy (the 1993 show lives in infamy). A group show of this size and ambition, the claims and choices made, are bound to rub you up the wrong way, somehow or somewhere (too many zombies and post-humans for my liking). And of course, it is brain-bustingly, time-consumingly noisy and over-crowded (and that’s before the actual crowds roll in). Charles Ray’s large metal men, rusted, painted white, silver-surfer silver, benefit from their space and seclusion on the outside terrace, whatever their inner despair. It does all suggest, though, something new and different is happening, a ramshackle and earthy formal invention (there is no AR or VR here, nothing too techy or promising sense-twisting immersion). And voices and stories, previously unheard, clamouring to be told. §