

ART REVIEW

‘Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It’s Kept’ Review: A Staging That Mutes Its Merits

The museum’s latest edition of its influential exhibition offers often compelling contemporary American works in a setting that hurts rather than helps them.

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Walking through “Quiet as It’s Kept,” the latest iteration of the Whitney Biennial, I found myself thinking of Segway, olestra and Google Glass. In short, of products with well-intentioned aims—electric personal transport, healthier food options, wearable tech—that flopped when on-paper ideas met real-world experiences.

This Biennial, the 80th edition of the exhibition that remains the most influential museum survey of contemporary American art, was pushed back from 2021 due to Covid-19. Co-curated by the museum’s David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards, it includes 63 artists and collectives spread mainly across two floors of the museum. And while there are many standout works here, the way the curators have chosen to display them—choices that were doubtlessly made in good faith—does little to highlight the art and, in some cases, even detracts from it.

The two primary floors are starkly different—one dark and labyrinthine, the other open and airy—the dichotomy “acknowledging the acute polarity of our society,” Mr. Breslin and Ms. Edwards say in their curatorial statement. No one will argue against the idea that society is incredibly polarized, but the choices of floor placement for certain works can seem arbitrary. Coco Fusco’s film “Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word,” in which the artist uses a rowboat to paddle around Hart Island, a potter’s field serving New York, and casts flowers into the water, is a moving essay on death and Covid, and makes sense on the funereal sixth floor.