

OBSERVER

The 'Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept' Is Anything but Quiet

The "Whitney Biennial 2022: Quiet as It's Kept" opens today in New York City until September 5 2022, amidst a freshly unionized staff.

By Annie Levin • 04/06/22



Trinh T. Minh-ha, still from *What about China?*, 2021. HD video, color, sound; 135 min. © Moongift Films. Courtesy the artist and Moongift Films

There are certain qualities and experiences you expect going into a Whitney Biennial. You expect to read long passages of puzzling descriptions on wall plaques, and to think (hard) while trying to connect the puzzling wall plaques to even more puzzling art objects. You expect to wince in confusion, or to grimace at bad taste, or bad art, or at whimsy gone terribly wrong. You expect to leave queasy with art overload, wondering just how many pieces have been brought into the world as pranks on the aesthetically uninitiated. However, you do not expect big emotions. You do not expect your heart to thunder and your breath to catch. You certainly don't expect to be

emotionally unmoored by the Whitney Biennial.

Mea Culpa. Color me surprised and among the newly converted. Unusually for a Whitney Biennial, works of fretful, quasi-intellectual whimsy and adolescent radicalism make up only a minority of works. The very best pieces even manage to tell something like the truth.

The black, funereal chambers on the uppermost 6th story of the exhibition draw one into a honeycomb of tomb-like galleries. Sound and texture are featured from the opening room, where Raven Chacon's *Silent Choir* glides one towards the gossamer curtain sectioning off Daniel Joseph Martinez's *Three Critiques*: photographic self-portraits depicting the artist as four distinctive post-human monsters. The shuffling of feet along the carpeted dark corridors, accompanied by the crackle from the video and sound installations, create a happy ASMR effect. The viewer is tended to and nurtured. In WangShui's *Hyaline Seed (Isle of Vitriolous)* we are even invited to lie down on couches and gaze up at an LED sculpture, created by an AI that folds light into comforting psychedelic jellyfish blobs on the ceiling. We are wrapped and cradled and comforted. So happily entombed was I in this robot crib, I returned to it at the end of my visit and only a security guard calling closing time could peel me away.

The star of the Biennial was, perhaps more than any one artist, the high-definition video camera. Biennial standouts were high-definition videos by Adam Pendleton in "Ruby Nell Sales," Trinh T. Minh-ha in "What About China," Coco Fusco, in "Your Eyes Will be an Empty Word," Danielle Dean in "Long Low Line," the Moved by Motion collective in "EXTRACTS," and Jacky Connolly in "Descent into Hell."

Perhaps the finest of these is Fusco's work, which pans up and down Hart Island, New York's public cemetery, which was worked by prisoners until 2021. The video dazzles with the unreal, high-definition blues and greens of the Long Island Sound, all while the poet Pamela Sneed narrates the story of the bodies, people dead from the coronavirus, taken to this potter's field. The video is viewed in the dark gallery space, with its simple yet impactful curation. Across a hall, in its own dark chamber, is Pendleton's extraordinary black and white high-definition video portrait of the civil rights activist, Ruby Nell Sales. His achingly gorgeous close ups of Sales' face and hands imbue this already luminous person with a kind of divinity. It depicts Sales telling stories and giving what sound like improvised sermons: heartbreaking benedictions which set the grief-stricken tone of the exhibition.



Danielle Dean, still from Long Low Line (Fordland), 2019. HD video, color, sound; 18:01 min. Collection of the artist. Image courtesy the artist; 47 Canal, New York; and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles

It feels appropriate for the art world to be in mourning at present, and it is a relief that the Whitney's curators understand that. It is a relief also that politics and activism are foregrounded. A fiery radicalism runs through many of the Biennial's best works. Alfredo Jaar's video installation, *06.01.2020 18.39* depicts a Washington DC protest the week that Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd. It shows the march from the point of view of a marcher, and a wind installation captures the effect of police helicopters flying low overhead. Jaar, a Chilean artist, lived through the devastation that neoliberalism wrought on his native country during the Pinochet regime. In his description of his work for the Biennial, he said of witnessing the George Floyd protests, "I watched with horror the arrival of the helicopters. That is when I realized that I was witnessing fascism. Fascism had arrived in the USA." Wandering into this installation, Jaar's work forcibly flung me back to the long nights during the New York City curfew summer of 2020, with their explosions, sirens, and police helicopters. He took me back to those giant #defund protests, with the heavily armored cops with military grade weapons closing in on all sides. He did all that with a black and white film and some heavy-duty fans. Like Picasso's bicycle seat "Bull's Head" it's so simple it almost feels like cheating. I was momentarily shattered and had to go lie down underneath WangShui's LED installation.

If the 6th floor is tasteful and finely curated, the 5th has all the subtlety of an elementary school science fair. A shame given the many fine works of art scattered across one of the museum's annoyingly huge airplane hanger galleries. Here the viewer is inundated by an apparently random collection of objects and installations. Andrew Roberts' *Cargo: A certain doom*, a severed zombie arm with the Amazon arrow swish tattooed across it, and *La Horda*—a video installation of four animated gig worker zombies, displayed like avatars in a video game's "choose your player" page—were poorly served by being stuck into the middle of the floor amidst so much confusion. This consumeristic, ADHD quality is so commonplace in museum group shows, it's almost unremarkable. Yet the upper floor proves that the curators can operate with a sublime set of aesthetics. Where the 6th floor nurtures the senses, the 5th oversaturates them. With so many video installations placed at angles to the static art, distractions abound. Woody de Othello's deft and witty *The Will to Make Things Happen*—in which surrealistic creatures and ordinary household objects are cast as ceramics inspired by precolonial pottery—is hidden amidst the clutter. Like too many objects on this floor, despite its placement in a bathtub of light, it's hard to see.

Curation is about making choices. It's about deciding who gets enclosed in a 6th floor mausoleum and who competes for attention on the sun washed 5th floor. Like so many Hollywood films, the end result is, no doubt, a combination of competing influences. And as in a heavily financialized studio film product, the Biennial's narrative trails off after a strong start.



Andrew Roberts, CARGO: A certain doom, 2020. Tattoo on silicon, 5 7/8 × 20 1/2 × 3 7/8 in. (15 × 52 × 10 cm). Image courtesy the artist and Pequod Co., Mexico City. Photograph by Sergio López

In its description of the Biennial, the museum boasts of how its artists question institutions and structures. The newly unionized Whitney employees, proudly wearing their union buttons while working the floors during the Biennial, could almost be a part of the exhibit itself. They certainly heightened some of the contradictions inherent in the exhibition when they held a leafleting protest during the Biennial's opening night gala: protesting the Whitney's refusal to negotiate with them over wages. The museum, housing so many politically radical works, albeit in a space that often looks and feels like a WeWork, is engaged in old time union busting. Hopefully, before the next Biennial, the museum's labor policies will have caught up with its purported politics. Perhaps with its foregrounding of political truths in its exhibitions, the museum administration will eventually see their way to negotiating a fair contract with their own employees.