

Restless and uncertain, the first Whitney Biennial since the pandemic began begs the question: Where do we go from here?

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff | March 31, 2022



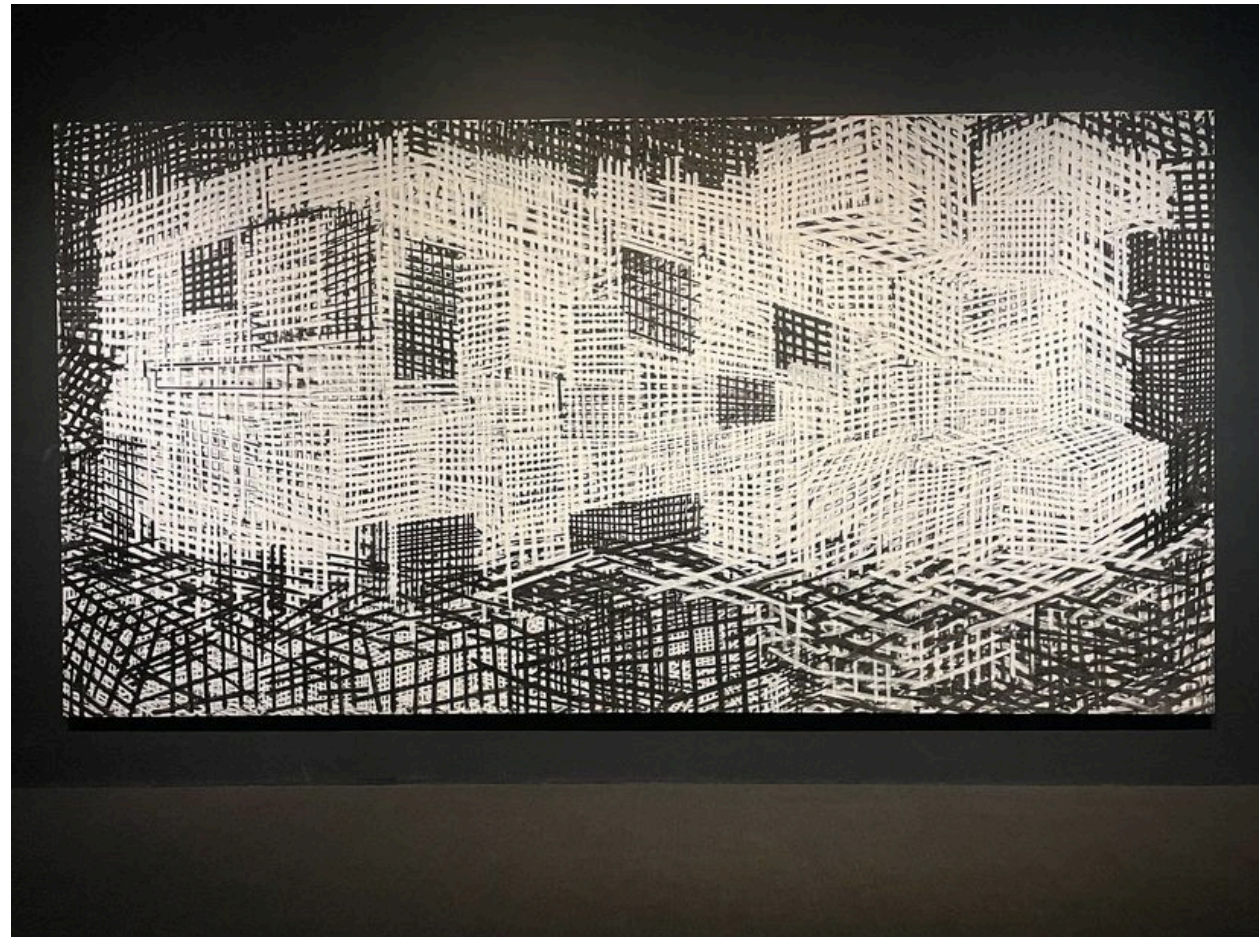
Coco Fusco, still from "Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word," 2021, at the 2022 Whitney Biennial, "Quiet as It's Kept." COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST, AND ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK. IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

NEW YORK — Is a Whitney Biennial a Whitney Biennial without a protest? Recent history says no: In 2019, activists rallied outside the museum to decry Warren Kanders, then the museum's board chair, whose company provided tear gas to police to deter asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border; in 2017, Dana Schutz's painting "Open Casket," which abstracted the mangled face of young Emmett Till at his funeral, lynched by racists in Mississippi in 1955, drew outrage alleging callous appropriation of racial suffering.

And now? I wouldn't say all's quiet, though at the press preview for the 2022 installment earlier this week, the hush was palpable. If you're counting, you'll notice that this year's biennial is technically a triennial — a year late, as pandemic prohibitions hobbled the museum's efforts to keep its schedule. The space between has been chaotic, destructive, terrorizing and bleak. "I mean this deeply: Thank you for being here," director Adam Weinberg said in his opening remarks. We knew exactly what he meant.

The biennial's unenviable task has always been to take the national temperature using art as its measure, a venture doomed to some degree of failure. An exhibition fastened too tightly to its moment can have little to say beyond it, and heaven help you if you miss the mark.

In 2022, the project is on uncharted ground. To his laundry list of upheaval — the pandemic; the murder of George Floyd by police and the surge of Black Lives Matter protests it prompted; an escalating left/right culture war; a planet convulsed by climate disaster — Weinberg added the month-old Russian invasion of Ukraine. Too fresh to appear materially in the exhibition, he said, it “heightens our anxiety all the same.” It just keeps coming.



Denyse Thomasos, "Jail," 1993, at the 2022 Whitney Biennial, "Quiet as It's Kept." BLUMENFELD COLLECTION/
PHOTO BY MURRAY WHYTE/GLOBE STAFF

Imagine the task in front of curators Adrienne Edwards and David Breslin: Define the moment when the moment is an entropic mass of death and rage and despair. The pair wisely abandoned standard biennial rules. An event typically hyper-focused on the immediate now, their installment of 63 artists includes older works and artists long-since passed away.

Restlessness and uncertainty are defining themes, right down to floorplan. Their biennial is split very deliberately in two: Upstairs on the sixth floor is dark and labyrinthine, with black walls and floors and low light; downstairs on the fifth, the interior walls have been removed, and daylight floods the space from floor-to-ceiling windows on both ends. The two floors could easily be separate exhibitions — fitting, maybe, for the chaotic and supersize timeframe they've taken in.

Edwards and Breslin spoke about old strategies being torqued to new purpose, and that's clear the moment the elevator doors whisk open on the sixth floor. The first thing you see is a massive

painting of black and white crosshatches, its thick gestural swipes bulking up into rough modular cubes. It's majestically, menacingly oppressive, and its title confirms: "Jail," a 1993 work by the Trinidadian-Canadian painter Denyse Thomasos, who died in 2012.

Thomasos is an emblem of the curators' plan to muddy the notion of abstract painting as pure emotion made form, a thread that runs through the whole endeavor. That was Jackson Pollock's idea, believing the Second World War's abundant horrors could only be faithfully portrayed in abstract explosions of emotional extremes. Thomasos rejected that explicitly, tethering gestural abstraction to social trauma in very specific terms. "Jail" seethes with outrage at a carceral state that imprisons Black people in disproportionate number; nearby is its pendant piece, a painting that detonates in long, angry strokes. She called it "Burial at Goree/Displaced Burial," for the slaving depot off Senegal where kidnapped Africans awaited the horrors of the middle passage. Its jagged form, long and low, seems to shatter in front of your eyes.

Thomasos's work sets the tone. But remember: She died a decade ago, and these paintings are from almost 10 years before that. It's a glum reminder: However urgent the moment, none of this is new. In a two-year span where time has felt so elastic, with structural markers — office hours, commutes, school days — either fluid or dissolved, this biennial feels grounding, albeit in the most troubling way. There's no novelty to social distress, whether racial, political, or otherwise. Being untethered to routine may not make it worse so much, finally, as make it clear.



Rebecca Belmore, "ishkode (fire)," 2021, at the 2022 Whitney Biennial. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST, PHOTO BY MURRAY WHYTE/GLOBE STAFF

In the gloom of the sixth floor, there's no clear way to turn. To the left, a totemic figure looms in shadow, adrift in a mound of shimmering steel. Straight ahead, just darkness. Choosing scant certainty over none, however grim, left I went. Here, Rebecca Belmore's "ishkode (fire)," 2021, drew a crowd, with its upright spike of a sleeping bag-swathed body surrounded by a skirt of

silvery bullet casings.

Belmore, who is Anishinaabe, lives and works in Vancouver, British Columbia, where her recent work has centered on a homelessness crisis brought on by the city's wildly expensive housing. Her work is not explicitly about Indigenous plight, though their numbers among the city's homeless are disproportionately high. The piece is ghostly, visceral, hauntingly gorgeous. But is it too obvious — homelessness and the inevitable violence it brings, in a grim pas de deux? In the before times, maybe. But with the past two pandemic years amplifying the yawning rift between rich and poor, is any such gesture too much? I can't look at the piece without thinking about pandemic profiteering, whatever its human costs.



Adam Pendleton, "Ruby Nell Sales," 2020-22, at the 2022 Whitney Biennial. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PACE GALLERY/PHOTO BY MURRAY WHYTE/GLOBE STAFF

The sixth floor gives us little tangible to hold on to, unfurling five video pieces, making works like Belmore's critical anchors. The videos unfold on theme: Coco Fusco's quietly gorgeous and sullen "Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word," 2021, centered on Hart Island in New York Harbor, where as many as a million bodies have been buried in mass graves over decades; Adam Pendleton's "Ruby Nell Sales," 2020-22, a somber, specular tableaux of images built around an interview with Sales, a civil rights activist nearly shot in 1965 by a segregationist sheriff in Alabama.

Where Fusco and Pendleton meditate on history and consequence, Alfredo Jaar brings us right up to date. In the show's most harrowing moment, his video piece "06.01.2020 18:39," 2022, links rough black and white footage of Black Lives Matter protests in Washington, D.C., six days after Floyd's murder. A bank of fans whirrs quietly overhead: Jaar builds to the moment that night when police helicopters hovered so low that some protesters were almost blown off their

feet. In that small space, the fans accelerate to a howl; your clothes will whip your body ferociously as you watch the scene in front of you. It's visceral, nerve-rattling genius.



Alfredo Jaar, still from "06.01.2020 18.39," at the 2022 Whitney Biennial. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIE LELONG & CO., NEW YORK AND PARIS

Maybe it was wrong to start upstairs. Coming down into the light, I felt unmoored, adrift in a loose scattering of paintings, photography, sculpture, and video that had no beginning or end. Meant as a counterpoint to the desolate affair above, it's bright and haphazard — intentionally so, built for the moment? — with terrific pieces at sea in the din. Aha. This felt more like the Whitney Biennial — too much all at once, so you pick and choose. But there are still those threads to pull.

A channel of abstraction runs through the heart of it, none more arresting than four big drapes of canvas, loose, earthy and gorgeous, by Omaskeko Cree artist Duane Linklater. They link to Thomasos with their refutation of abstract purity. Linklater took the bolts of fabric cut to teepee patterns and left them outdoors to be dyed and stained by the elements, binding them to Indigenous sovereignty, and the land. Tied to Belmore is Rose Salane's "64,000 Attempts at Circulation," 2022, which presents three mounds of counterfeit slugs made to grift parking meters and transit systems. On first glance, the work is classical conceptual-art prank, but think again: In a pandemic episode where those who could afford to stay home did, while those who couldn't risked their lives to earn a living, Salane's piece carries heavy freight about class, race, and the economic divide.



Duane Linklater, "wintercount_215_kisepîsim," and "mistranslate_wolftreeriver_ininîmowinîhk," both 2022, at the 2022 Whitney Biennial. COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CATRIONA JEFFRIES, VANCOUVER. PHOTO BY MURRAY WHYTE/GLOBE STAFF

The Biennial's duty to summarize recent trends in American art — because at its heart, that's its job — means checking some boxes, digitally-produced art and artificial intelligence among them. And the curators make some terrific choices. Andrew Roberts's "La Horda (The Horde)," 2020, presciently captured what I think we're all feeling, with a lineup of digitally generated zombies working for the likes of Google, Apple, and Netflix — the grim endgame to the "whatever-and-chill" movement, I like to think. Danielle Dean's fabulously lush digital animations make a stronger case for the medium than anything else here, using an early multiplane camera technique pioneered by Disney to create immersive environments (spoiler: it really works).

The technology was inspired by the Ford motor company, which is the subject of Dean's work here, focused on Fordlandia, a real-life town the company built in the 1920s Amazon rain forest to harvest rubber. Dean's portrait of environmental devastation exists in two eras: on screen in the immediate now, and in her remarkable watercolors depicting Fordlandia's devastation, long ago.

Feeling scattered, I went back upstairs to end my visit enveloped in the disquieting dark. Only then did I enter the empty space at its heart. It was so obvious as to be completely missable, a 15-foot square with one small spotlit vitrine pushed up against the wall. There was sound, or at least the opposite of silence: an ambient whisper of crowd noise, shuffling or shrugging, the occasional throat clear. It was chilling, strange, and engulfing. The sound was “Silent Choir,” a 2017 audio piece by the Diné artist Raven Chacon, who recorded a silent confrontation between hundreds of protestors opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline and police. The vitrine held a glass tube, corked and empty. In it, the legend goes, is the last breath of Thomas Edison, as collected by Henry Ford, now owned by his foundation. Where do we go from here? Down roads of Ford’s alleged Nazism, of Edison’s engineering of modernity, generator of the great divide? Of course. But after all this, I’m going to take it as a cue: Just breathe.

THE WHITNEY BIENNIAL: QUIET AS IT’S KEPT

April 6-Sept. 5, The Whitney Museum of American Art. 99 Gansevoort St., New York.
212-570-3600, www.whitney.org.