

A Glimpse Into This Year's Whitney Biennial

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In organizing the 2022 Whitney Biennial—the museum's 80th, somehow, in 90 years—senior curators David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards followed a series of “hunches.”

These related to the expressive capabilities of abstraction, as well as to notions like “a kind of lush conceptualism, auto-ethnographic methodology, language and narrative in visual art, and sinister pop,” Edwards writes in the show's catalogue; adding up to a wide-ranging examination of the state of contemporary art in our strange and fractious times. Breslin and Edwards's efforts, which began at the end of 2019, have resulted in a commanding exhibition showcasing 63 artists and collectives—most living, some dead—working across painting, sculpture, photography, video, and choreography and spanning four levels of the museum. Among the biggest names are Charles Ray (who also has a [show up](#) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art right now), N. H. Pritchard, Yto Barrada, Ellen Gallagher, and [Adam Pendleton](#).

The Biennial's subtitle, “Quiet as It's Kept,” is similarly varied in its origins, alluding at once to the first line of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the title of a 1960 album by the jazz drummer Max Roach, and to [an exhibition](#) curated by the artist David Hammons in 2002. “[It] featured three abstract artists who are Black American—Ed Clark, Stanley Whitney, and Denyse Thomasos,” Edwards explained during a preview this week, “and that show was really trying to pinpoint a set of ideas that have been very important to us: How can you talk about identity in a way that is not limiting; that does not confine or constrain the possibilities of what those identities can be?” In light of those ideas, Breslin added that he and Edwards had conceived of the Biennial as a living thing: “One of the hunches that we had was that the show should have a metabolism—that it should grow and change as we all do,” he said. As such, some elements will look a bit different as the months go on (see: Alex Da Corte's *ROY G BIV*, 2022, a video work projected onto a cube that will change color over the run of the exhibition), while others will come and go—two good reasons to visit more than once.

Here, a glimpse at just some of what you'll find at the 2022 Whitney Biennial.

On the museum's sixth floor, the visitor is immediately confronted by two large canvases by Denyse Thomasos (1964-2012), each animated by vigorous cross-hatching. While in one of the paintings, *Jail* (1993), the lines coalesce into a broad, boxy structure, the other, *Displaced Burial / Burial at Gorée*, leans headlong into chaos: Its name refers to the Senegalese Island of Gorée, a notable stop in the slave trade. “During my research on slavery, I encountered a doctor's journal that recorded in great detail the head sizes of adults and infants, the dimensions of their necks and their bodies, the quality of their teeth,” the Trinidadian-born artist once wrote. “I was struck by the premeditated, efficient, dispassionate records of human beings as cargo and also by the deplorable conditions of the slave ships—so many Africans stacked and piled into the tiny, airless holds. In my artworks, I used lines in deep space to re-create these claustrophobic conditions, leaving no room to breathe.”

Elsewhere on the rather labyrinthine floor is an arresting sculpture by the Canadian Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore. (She is joined, in this Biennial, by two other Indigenous artists: Raven Chacon, who is Diné, and Duane Linklater, who is Omaskêkolniniwak.) Shrouded in a sleeping bag colored a grim, rusty brown and faded black, a faceless figure stands amidst hundreds, if not thousands, of bullet casings (not pictured here). It sets a decidedly dire scene, suggestive of, as Belmore puts it, “our inability to overcome the violence we continue to wage against each other—and the violence we commit against the earth.” Yet there’s a sense of hopeful possibility to be found here, too: At least this huddled, harried figure is still standing.

Adam Pendleton, who recently took over MoMA’s Atrium with the text-, image-, and sound-based installation

Who Is Queen? Who Is Queen?, has at the Biennial both a pair of abstract paintings called *Untitled (Days)*, 2021-2022, and an affecting video portrait of the social-justice activist and scholar Ruby Sales. (In earlier works, Pendleton focused on the likes of Lorraine O’Grady, choreographer Kyle Abraham, and former Black Panther Party member David Hilliard.) “I was listening to WNYC in September 2016 and heard a voice. The character, the tempo, the tone made me pay attention. It was the activist Ruby Sales. She was posing a very simple question: ‘Where does it hurt?’ It’s a question that urgently gets to the heart of the matter about being American,” Pendleton notes in the Biennial’s catalogue.

His paintings bracket three compelling canvases by James Little, whose work in geometric abstraction—executed in oils mixed with beeswax—hinges on its feeling of freedom. “Abstraction provided me with self-determination and free will. It was liberating. I don’t find freedom in any other form,” he’s explained.

On the much brighter—and busier—fifth floor, where 38 artists share the same high-ceilinged gallery space, the Laos-born, Minnesota-based photographer Pao Houa Her has mounted an engaging series of still lifes and portraits conversant with her Hmong American identity. “My photography explores how the international Hmong community makes and remakes our collective memory,” she says. “I photograph Hmong and Hmong Americans, placing my subjects in romantic environments full of floral silk, opium-flower patterns, images of the Mekong River, and Southeast Asian mountainscapes.”

Nearby, Breslin and Edwards have created a show-within-a-show devoted to the South Korean-born writer, editor, and artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who was killed in New York in 1982. (Her first novel, *Dictee*, had been published just a week earlier.) It includes a projection of Cha’s 1976 film *Permutations*—a 10-minute study of her sister’s face and head with a brief, haunting appearance from the artist herself—as well as documents and imagery from Cha’s provocative performance-art practice.

A new work from Lucy Raven, who has often challenged romantic conceptions of the American West with a more material, industrial sensibility, also lives on the fifth floor. The mesmerizing *Demolition of a Wall (Album 1)* centers just that—the explosion of a wall in remote Socorro, New Mexico—paying special attention to the shock waves it sets off through space. “Structurally, there’s some relation to *Crossroads (1976)* by Bruce Conner,” Raven points out, “where you have a succession of violence, an impact happening over and over. It’s not the climax of the film; it’s just the film. It’s the pulse of it.”

Another exciting engagement with landscape comes via Leidy Churchman’s *Mountains Walking, 2022*, made up of three 13-foot-long canvases mounted on a hand-crafted wooden easel. Calling to mind Monet’s water lilies at the Musée de l’Orangerie, the painting is a dream of pastel tones and dramatic gestures, with firm roots in Zen Buddhist philosophy. But don’t let us tell you: There is so much more to see and be enthralled by at the Biennial. Brave the trip to the Meatpacking District, and be prepared to be surprised.

The Whitney Biennial is up from April 6 until September 5.