

ARTFORUM



View of the Whitney Biennial 2022. From left: Mónica Arreola, works from the series “Valle San Pedro,” 2018–20; Danielle Dean, *Long Low Line (Fordland)*, 2019. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Whitney Biennial 2022

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Curated by David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards

ALL BIENNIALS are architecture biennials. This is made especially clear in the eightieth edition of the Whitney Biennial 2022: “Quiet as It’s Kept,” which unfolds mainly across the museum’s fifth and sixth floors, respectively themed light and dark.

A handful of works occupy other areas, such as Rodney McMillian’s *shaft*, 2021–22, an antimemorial dick joke in the form of a vascular painting-object not meant to be seen in its entirety. The enormous tube, covered in multicolored paint, spans six stories of the museum’s central stairwell. Fittingly, the Biennial’s literal throughline is something that allows for no overview. You have to walk around to get a sense.

The lightness of the fifth floor comes from both the white walls and the open-plan exhibition design, which accommodates conceptual as well as material density without sacrificing an expansive feel. The spatial solutions are elegant: Large, eye-catching works

occupy freestanding white support frames, with smaller artworks on the verso, and several pieces hang from the ceiling, banner style. These contrivances allow curators David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards to play with scale and make connections among artists: Behind the ten-foot Middle Passage parable canvas by Ellen Gallagher lie Veronica Ryan's found- and crafted-object assemblages, some of them attached to the aforementioned scaffolding, others on flimsy shelves held together with zip ties. Ryan's *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 2022, uses material play to confuse the what-gets-placed-where order of things while referencing global displacement—of objects and of people treated as objects. The support wall she shares with Gallagher brings their thematic concerns into proximity while bridging their distinct formal approaches.

A run of nearby pieces deals with corporate-nihilist systems: Danielle Dean's watercolor landscapes, littered with Amazon boxes and unresolvable perspectives; Emily Barker's sculptural documentation of their entanglement with the US health-care system, in the form of a five-foot-high stack of photocopied medical paperwork; Andrew Roberts's tech-giant-branded zombie animations; Jane Dickson's handpainted signage; Sable Elyse Smith's collaged *Cops* footage and prison furniture, looped on itself into a Ferris wheel. Taken together, these works present various ways to index the American Real.

Works that exploit slippage between the power of representation and the representation of power happen on the other side of the gallery. Both the pedestal and the impacted column of Aria Dean's *Little Island/Gut Punch*, 2022, are covered in chroma-key paint. Digital modeling created the crumpled Platonic shape, outsourced fabrication made it material, and the green-screen coating has draped the statue in robes tailored for digital cameras to see. Western art cares *a lot* about realistically rendered fabric folds; Dean's algorithmically wrested folds care only about the render.

Punch pairs well with Rose Salane's adjacent *64,000 Attempts at Circulation*, 2022. Five card tables hold hundreds of tokens that New York City commuters have used to (successfully) fake bus fare: Value circulates as abstraction. This is the most optimistic piece in the show.

UP ON THE SIXTH FLOOR, themes of death and endemic unrest contribute to the darkness as much as the black walls, black floor, and windowless installation rooms do. Denyse Thomasos's large black-and-white paintings greet visitors as they exit the elevator. Broad, confident brushstrokes outline claustrophobic architectures of indeterminate scale. Thomasos' painterly energy communicates the eerie dynamism of seemingly static structures animated by unmappable sensation—as well as the feeling that these complex arrangements have been sketched and are therefore provisional. Titles ground us: *Jail* and *Displaced Burial/Burial at Gorée*, both 1993. The artist died in 2012; seeing these works displayed in this way is a gift.

The floor's centerpiece is Raven Chacon's installation *Silent Choir*, 2017, which focuses on the infamous 1,172-mile stretch of extractive energy infrastructure known as the Dakota Access Pipeline. Twin spotlights shine in Chacon's dark, carpeted antechamber: One is aimed at nothing in particular; the other highlights a vitrine whose stoppered test tube, on loan from the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation is said to contain Thomas Edison's final breath. (Though not part of *Silent Choir*, the vial and a near-invisible object were placed there by the curators as an intentional constellation for the sixth floor's entrance, which they consulted with the artist about in advance.) Ceiling speakers amplify Chacon's recording of a women-led silent protest against the pipeline. A lacuna, consolidated. Edison knew that his lightbulb would be useless without a centralized power network to give it juice. Objects may illuminate us, but infrastructures concentrate power and in so doing standardize how we fuck with the world.

A month after the Biennial opened, Chacon won a Pulitzer Prize in music for a thematically related composition. "In exploiting the architecture of the cathedral," he said, "*Voiceless Mass* considers the futility of giving voice to the voiceless, when ceding space is never an option for those in power." *Silent Choir* mobilizes porousness, bleed, and absence-as-presence to confront a hostile infrastructure without mirroring its hardness.

It's a lesson Alfredo Jaar could learn. Jaar's video installation *06.01.2020 18.39*, 2022, opens with slow-motion footage of (muted) black men saying . . . something . . . urgent? . . . to one another at a BLM protest. Later, when police helicopters appear, an array of high-powered ceiling fans switch on, blasting you with air and noise. *The Black Lives Matter Experience!* It's not just that using documentary-filmmaking techniques to decontextualize black emotion is troubling—we're used to that. The main issue is that this is an outmoded sense of mimesis, unable to tap into any of the collective energies or grassroots media practices that made these protests so resonant.

Bless Coco Fusco. Her bullshit-free video meditation on our present pandemic, vis-à-vis America's largest potter's field, New York City's Hart Island ("where the numbers rise but the counting stops"), gives you emotional space to fill with your own Covid/collapse reflections. The twelve minutes of *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word*, 2021, narrated by Pamela Sneed, were filmed mostly by drone, and show Fusco rowing along the shoreline, tossing white carnations into Long Island Sound. The top-down shots do not totalize; rather, they reproduce the difficulty of perceiving this particular hidden system and all the grief connected to it.

FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS are as absent as NFTs. Overall, the show shies away from the digital. The few digital animations—Jacky Connolly's *Descent into Hell*, 2021; Roberts's *La horda*, 2020—feel old, especially when compared with all the crazy shit happening in actual video games.

Rayyane Tabet's *100 Civics Questions*, 2022, appears across unexpected areas of the Whitney's building as well as under the main navigation menu on the institution's website. The artwork consists of questions lifted from the US naturalization test, rendered in the

museum's signature Helvetica font. Transplanted here, they turn Socratic. *Who vetoes bills? What did the Declaration of Independence do?* That there's no way of knowing whether we've encountered all the interpellating question is part of the point.

For all its glossy luster, the installation *ECHO POSITION, 2022*, by artist-activist duo Ivy Kwan Arce and Julie Tolentino remains mysterious. Translucent glass slabs like enormous Jolly Ranchers rest on mirrored platforms. Wall texts inform us that "glass orbs within the Museum communicate via satellite with identical orbs" carried by members of Arce's active-care network. Their technology gets deployed to create an interpersonal web, for participants only. We are not privy to the nature of this communication, but a related poster clues us in to the central concern of HIV-AIDS activism. The objects on view are presented as ancillary to a community's formation. It's a sentiment shared by the Steve Cannon homage installation in the same space, which re-creates the East Village living room from which the poet ran his literary magazine *A Gathering of the Tribes* and the salon-cum-gallery bearing the same name.

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Outside, unremarkable terrace sculptures by Charles Ray (three statues of lonely men) and Alia Farid (plastic palm trees) bring to mind the exuberant showstoppers featured in the same spaces during the previous Biennial: Nicole Eisenman's glorious, farty sculptural group *Procession, 2019*, and Meriem Bennani's zany, palm-tree-bedecked video viewing garden. This Biennial borders on humorless, which is a loss. A good joke is one of the few things that can simultaneously reflect and interrupt these nightmare times. And as Eisenman and Bennani prove again and again, some of the most affecting art is also the funniest.

Breslin and Edwards wrote that "artworks can complicate the meaning of 'American' by addressing the country's physical and psychological boundaries," then spoke of two decisions they made to further this: focusing on Indigenous artists from the US and

Canada and incorporating Mexican artists at work in border cities such as Juárez. This emphasis is an unmitigated good, responsible for some of the strongest work here. However, we all know that the primary “boundaries” in America are neither physical nor psychological. They are economic. The roughly two-hundred-member Whitney Museum Union acknowledged the existence of such boundaries outside the Biennial’s packed, invite-only opening party. “We formed our union in August 2021 to address our low wages, our lack of job security, and unsustainable conditions of work,” read their leaflet in support of contract negotiations. “More than half of us earn under \$20 per hour.”

Economic boundaries come into focus on the third floor. Kandis Williams’s *Cassandra Press* installation provides reading copies of thirty-one of the publisher’s printed anthologies—critical texts centering black femme perspectives—arranged on playfully slanted bookshelves. It’s a great example of how an exhibition can be transformed into a pedagogical space. Except you have to pay museum admission to enter. A library that charges \$25 to access radical texts by writers of color is pure dystopia. Why isn’t the reading room in the lobby or any location where people could peruse these books for free?

The Biennial’s most striking installation choice is to hang Adam Gordon’s pointedly unpointed painting in the middle of an otherwise unoccupied panoramic window on the fifth floor. *She throws children into the world*, 2022, portrays an empty living room adorned by a disco ball. Gordon made physical interventions in the depicted space, then painted it in a shadowy gray palette using soft brushstrokes. He considers his invisible underpaintings essential and refers to them as “infrastructure.”

In reproduction, the work’s weirdness stabilizes to the extent that it can easily be mistaken for a photograph, a document, a datum. In person, it’s something else entirely, an uninhabited presence modulated by the architecture’s changing light conditions and the lively view framing it. The longer one looks, the less solid it all becomes. Art suspended over a city: hot-dog stand, High Line, indigents, tourists.