

Whitney Biennial Picks 63 Artists to Take Stock of Now

The influential exhibition, which opens in April, will lean toward the conceptual, with particular attention to Native artists and the U.S.-Mexico border.

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A scene from Coco Fusco's film about Hart Island, "Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word," 2021. Coco Fusco and Alexander Gray Associates

Even in regular times, organizing the Whitney Biennial is a high-stakes project. The show is a barometer — anticipated and debated for the picture it proposes of tendencies in American art and their public relevance. Participation can turbocharge an artist's career. The exhibition sometimes becomes a lightning rod for political controversy.

This time around, the biennial, which opens on April 6, has the burden of responding to the crisis atmosphere, from the pandemic to social protests and political conflict, that has taken hold since the last edition in 2019.

"These last few years have been a very dense moment," said David Breslin, a co-organizer of this edition with Adrienne Edwards; both are senior curators at the museum. "Our hope is that this show permits a taking stock, a way of seeing what we're maybe not at the end of, but in the middle of, and how art can help make sense of our times."

On Tuesday the museum revealed the 63 artists and collectives that Breslin and Edwards have selected for the show, along with the title they've given it — "Quiet as It's Kept" — and their approach to the exhibition.

The roster is diverse, like the last two editions, but skews older. With just 23 artists under 40, and eight born in the 1990s, the show is less a revealer of unknowns than an intergenerational mix. There is a clear disposition toward conceptual and interdisciplinary work. Film and performance will be integrated into the main exhibition, not separate programs.

The show's doyenne, born in 1947, is the Puerto Rican artist and choreographer Awilda Sterling-Duprey; the youngest, born in 1995, is Andrew Roberts, a Mexican artist working in film, animation and installation, who is based in Tijuana and Mexico City.

Prominent names include Yto Barrada, Nayland Blake, Coco Fusco, Ellen Gallagher, Renée Green and Adam Pendleton. Five artists are deceased, among them the writer and conceptualist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who was murdered in 1982.

The show has more artists than usual who have taken part in a past biennial or are already in the Whitney's collection, according to Scott Rothkopf, the museum's chief curator. Still, he added, there will be plenty of discoveries.

The U.S.-Mexico border is a focus area, with artists from Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. There is an emphasis as well on Native artists, extending to First Nations in Canada and including Rebecca Belmore, Raven Chacon, Duane Linklater and Dyani White Hawk.

In a phone interview with both curators, Edwards said that "without a doubt" the show is taking a position — it seeks to complicate the ways in which social identity and personal experience are exhibited and valued in the art world today. "There's been a lot of demands around a certain legibility," Edwards said. "We wanted to turn around and say, well, there are artists who are doing these things differently, through abstraction or conceptual art."

They envisioned from the start a cross-generational exhibition. "We wanted to show a sinew, a genealogy, through some of the ideas that we felt circulating," Breslin said. "It's an opportunity to see how ideas deepen, are transfigured and taken up anew."

The staging will be innovative, with one main floor an almost open-plan "clearing," with broad vistas, and the other a dark, labyrinth-like "space of containment." "It's a speculative show in an uncertain time," Breslin said. "How it's laid out and feels is as important as everything else."

The pandemic posed more than conceptual challenges. Breslin and Edwards had barely embarked on an ambitious itinerary to meet artists in their studios and communities — the most organic, intimate part of the process — when travel shut down in March 2020. They ended up largely curating over Zoom. The show was postponed from its initial dates in 2021 to this year.

In phone interviews, several artists in the biennial described work they will present and their experiences preparing amid the unusual circumstances.

Some work was prompted at least partly by the pandemic. Fusco — a veteran of the 1993 and 2008 biennials — is showing a film about Hart Island, where New York City's unclaimed dead are buried. She filmed from a boat, using drones — island access is restricted — in the summer of 2020. Some of the pandemic's early victims were buried there, Fusco said, echoing memories from the AIDS crisis. "So I made a piece about the graves, and the dead," she said.

Roberts, the Mexican artist, contracted Covid-19 twice — the first time a severe case that left him unable to focus for months. Eventually he wrote a series of poems; in his video installation these are read by zombie avatars — voiced by actors — who he said "work for corporations in the future, form class consciousness and become aware of the violence perpetrated on their bodies."

For Woody De Othello, who lives in Oakland and makes ceramic and bronze sculptures of oversize, distended household objects — telephones, faucets, space heaters — lockdown only deepened his themes. “The energy of being at home was in my work,” he said. “A lot of objects that I make come from a domestic realm.” Working alone in the studio, emerging for hikes with his dog, resulted in “confronting the self and thinking about intention.”

Plenty of projects predate current events. Chacon, a composer — he took part in the 2017 biennial as a member of the collective Postcommodity — is bringing works that result from 20 years of sonic research. They include graphic scores dedicated to Indigenous women composers, which will be performed, and a recording of a silent standoff between Indigenous women and police during the Standing Rock protests. His video installation, filmed on Navajo, Cherokee and Seminole lands, features women singing in those languages the stories of sites where massacres or removals took place — areas now contested again, for mining or other uses.

During one protest following the killing of George Floyd in 2020, Chacon joined actions to topple the statue of a conquistador in Albuquerque, N.M.; one of his friends was shot by a militia member.

“We’ve been through a lot,” Chacon said, adding that he hoped the difficult times encouraged artists to “try different tactics to create work.”

That experimental bent, in present and past, is the common ground in a show that Edwards described as an “ensemble” — not just of identity perspectives, but of methods.

The Los Angeles-based artist Na Mira, whose video and holographic installation draws on research in Korea on shamanism, feminism and her family history, said she looked forward to the range in the show. “I really believe that art is an epistemology: that we learn things through this discipline that we can’t get anywhere else,” Mira said. “It will be interesting to feel the differences, how they weave and rub against each other.”

Rose Salane, a Queens-raised artist who explores urban life through residual everyday objects, is presenting a project that involves sifting through 64,000 “slugs” — laundry tokens, fake coins and other objects the M.T.A. retrieved from bus fare machines. She was eager to experience the work of her peers as well.

“These last two years have been pressuring on everyone,” Salane said. “To see work persevere through that is pretty hardcore.”