

ARTFORUM



View of the Whitney Biennial 2022. Steve Cannon's library and *A Gathering of the Tribes* archival material. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Whitney Biennial 2022

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Curated by David Breslin and Adrienne Edwards

SPLENDOR. That's the word that comes to mind as one walks—sails—through the 2022 Whitney Biennial. Splendor as a transformative experience, affecting soul and spirit. Curated with visual alacrity, emotional commitment, and historical heft by Adrienne Edwards and David Breslin, this exhibition, which is so much about loss, discovery, and opening our eyes to the possibility of art in space, also destabilizes the museum-as-institution's relationship to what makes an exhibition. No more walls, the curators seem to be saying throughout the show—specifically on the largely open fifth floor—and, while we're at it, let's have more trust in the viewer's ability to “get” work that may be challenging, and so what? We're all in this together.



Coco Fusco, *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word*, 2021, HD video, color, sound, 12 minutes.

It's a democratic ethos, requiring discipline and vision, and one rarely seen in a museum context. Is it too much to ask that the viewer work with the art as opposed to letting the art "just" happen? Breslin and Edwards create a wonderful stage for this possibility—one that encourages either/or acceptance of the material they've gathered with such rigor and love. By "acceptance," I don't mean to suggest that there is something about art we should or shouldn't accept: If we look at a thing, it becomes part of us, no matter what; the viewer's job is to remain porous to the experience of looking. Still, there are artifacts in the world, on our screens, in our minds—Holocaust photographs, pictures that document female mutilation, lynchings, and so on—that we don't know what to do with, or how to be a part of, because we still don't know what to do with our terrible hand in any of it. The critical but never puritanical curation of Breslin and Edwards creates a context for pain as well as joy; they help us bear what is ugly within us all, to learn and take from it what we can to make new art, new experiences.

If we look at a thing, it becomes part of us, no matter what; the viewer's job is to remain porous to the experience of looking.

Part of the ugliness or difficulty is loneliness. Loneliness as a universal wound: That's what one sees in artist and writer Coco Fusco's twelve-minute video *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word*, 2021. The work, a response to Covid-19 and the quick and slow erosion of life as she knew it, is as much an inquiry into how to visualize death as anything else. Fusco doesn't rely on pictures of scourges and pandemics past to achieve her captivating, mournful effects; she evokes grief through images of water—of the sea, which the poet Marianne Moore likened to a “well-excavated grave,” in that we take from the sea more than we give or have given. Fusco's bodies of water are filled with the dead, a horror show of waves and flowers. In certain shots, petals are scattered on the water's surface, but in remembrance of what? The eternal whirlpool, or bodies cast overboard, the better to keep moving through time and thus history? We don't know what's beneath the surface of anything, not really, but part of the power of vision is how we use it. When we are very brave, we want to dive past surfaces to get at what we humans mean when we create something that's meant to be seen, despair and joy included. But what if you've been denied the privilege, been “lost to vision altogether,” to invoke the title of Tom Kalin's now historic and always relevant 1989 video about AIDS, grief, and fear? What if your vision is a memory in the museum of your mind?