

# Forbes

## 10 Art Works You Must See At The 2017 Whitney Biennial

By [Adam Lehrer](#), Forbes  
March 13, 2017

We are living in an era of unparalleled regressive decline. The pendulum of progress has historically always swung back and forth in The United States. The civil rights reforms of JFK and LBJ were met by the security state corruption of Nixon. The moderate civics of Clinton came before the war mongering fear tactics of W. But never has there been an anti-progress movement as sharp and unsettling as what we are currently seeing Trump and the GOP do to undermine the considerable domestic achievements of Obama: Muslim bans, the demonizing of the American press, women's rights attacks, transgender rights attacks, and mass deportations have all made modern American life a series of solitary horrors. But we have one saving grace: our smart phones. Perhaps we should all be thanking Steve Jobs, because even though the Internet has facilitated the spread of false information via Facebook and other social networking ads, we should still consider ourselves lucky that the flow of information cannot be disrupted in any meaningful sense. Artists at their best are the reflections of their time periods, therefore it made perfect sense that the contemporary artists exhibited at the stunning 2017 Whitney Biennial, the first Biennial to take place at The Whitney Museum's new Meatpacking District home, often utilized the technology available to them to make sharp and intellectual political statements.



*(from left) Whitney Museum Deputy Director for Programs and Chief Curator Scott Rothkopf, Biennial co-curators Mia Locks and Christopher Y. Lew, and Whitney Museum director Adam D. Weinberg*

Co-curated by Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, [The Whitney Biennial](#) counted 'the formation of self' and 'the individual's place in a turbulent society' amongst its primary themes. How does one remain fearlessly true to themselves when powerful forces seek to diminish the identities of so many humans that aren't rich, white and male? How do we not become complacent in the face of white nationalism as the new standard? I found myself

asking these questions and more while perusing the works exhibited at the 2017 Biennial. “When we first embarked on this project sometime in 2015 the world felt like a completely different place,” said Locks. “It became apparent that the idea of ‘humanness’ or what it means to be a human right now was an energizing force for the show. Many of the works in the show address interesting questions about how we view ourselves as human beings and the forces that bring us together and the forces that bring us apart.”

The curators decided to include work by well-established artists like Jordan Wolfson, William Pope. L and Jo Baer as well as artists so unknown that some of them don’t even have a page on [Artsy](#), like Rafa Esparza and Maya Stovall. The video pieces and more technological works in the show, including those by artists like Wolfson, Tuan Andrew Nguyen and Tommy Hartung, were perhaps the most confrontationally political of the Biennial. The photographic projects, by artists like Deana Lawson and Lyle Ashton Harris, felt more personal and identity exploratory. There was also a surprising emphasis on traditional methods of art making, including paintings by the likes of Carrie Moyer and Shara Hughes, that allowed viewers a respite from the political charge of the show. But because of this, even the paintings that focused on the core elements of art (form, shape, color) felt political in their reaffirming of the practice of painting as a means of establishing one’s identity. And this doesn’t even come close to recounting all the work in the Biennial that also included stunning feats of sculpture and installation. Below are 10 of my favorite pieces and installations of the 2017 Whitney Biennial.

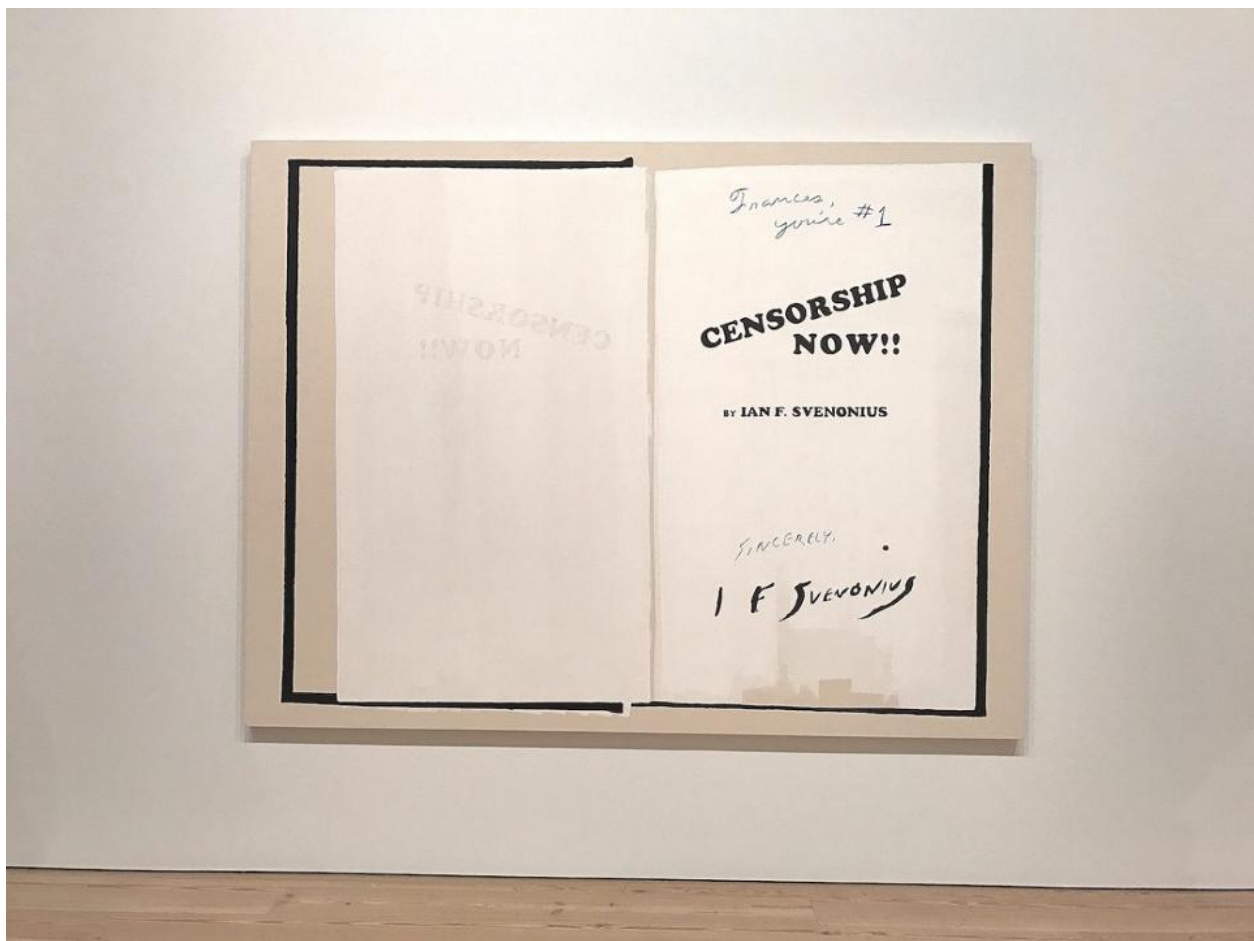
Jordan Wolfson, *Real violence*



New York-based artist Jordan Wolfson is not exactly an emerging artist, after all he was featured alongside the likes of artists Ryan Trecartin and the late Dash Snow in Kelly Crow’s 2003 article for *The Wall Street Journal* [The \(23-Year-\) Old Masters](#). But it can certainly seem like he is. Since premiering his horrifying animatronic sculpture *Colored Sculpture*, a disfigured looking dummy who literally comes to life to dance and taunt the audience, last year at David Zwirner Gallery, Wolfson has received an almost unprecedented amount of media exposure: he has been featured in *Fantastic Man* magazine, received cover stories from [Kaleidoscope Magazine](#) and *Office* magazine, and *Colored Sculpture* itself appeared on the cover of *Out of Order* magazine in a polished photograph composed by the

fashion photography duo Inez and Vinoodh. Perhaps that could read to some that Wolfson is in danger of becoming over-exposed. But the fact of the matter is, Wolfson is one of a few artists presenting a radically new method of art making. One that embraces digital programming techniques like animatronics and virtual reality to create works of art that are aesthetically menacing, powerful, political, and wittily satirical. At the Biennial, Wolfson presented a virtual reality film entitled *Real violence*. When the viewer puts on the VR goggles, they are forced into the position of innocent bystander as Wolfson himself commits an act of horrifying violence, caving in another man's head with a bat and later his shoes. Wolfson's art work is not easy to swallow, but like great genre filmmakers he utilizes sensationalism to manifest his political viewpoint. After viewing the VR work, it's hard not to think of CNN and all their free coverage offered to Trump before they realized he was a legitimate political contender. You think of the arrogant pollsters, who lulled us all into a state of complacency with their wildly inaccurate predictions that a Hilary presidency was inevitable. And the piece also indicts all of us who in one way or another feel like we didn't do enough to stop this national tragedy.

Frances Stark, *Ian F Svenonius Censorship Now!!*



Admittedly, Los Angeles-based artist Frances Stark's series of paintings 'Ian F. Svenonius's Censorship Now!!' had an immediate personal impact on me due to its subject matter. Musician and writer Ian Svenonius is a personal hero of mine. His early '90s Washington D.C. post-hardcore punk band Nation of Ulysses is one of my favorite bands of all time (ironically, I was actually listening to the band's 1992 album *Plays Pretty for Baby* on my Apple Music playlist while riding the MTA to the Biennial preview), and I have almost as much love for his bands The Make-Up and Chain and The Gang. I have also long obsessed over his essays in the likes of VICE and the late [Index Magazine](#). Svenonius has a talent for placing rock n' roll, soul and jazz in the context of art history and history at large. He is a rock star, culture critic, and historian, all rolled in one. Stark's art work often focuses on the meaning

of language, and how its process is translated into a creative act. For her contribution to the Biennial, she composed paintings that inflate pages taken from Svenonius's incendiary essay *Censorship Now!!*. *Censorship Now!!* argues that artists need to take control of censorship to combat everything from the blandness of mass-produced pop music to the espousing of fascist ideologies under the auspices that one is testing free speech. Svenonius's tone is severe, but the viewer doesn't need to completely agree with him to see where he's coming from. Freedom of speech has hit its limits in our culture. No longer is there a healthy debate between left and right-wing ideologies contributing to a common good. No, now the right is dominated by ideologues like Donald Trump, Steve Bannon and the disgraced [Milo Yiannopoulos](#). These men utter hate speech and total falsehoods and use "freedom of speech" to protect themselves from criticisms of that speech. Freedom of speech has become dangerous, and it's east to see why Svenonius believes it needs to be scaled back. Stark's paintings of this text is an interesting and modern method of appropriation. Over art history, artists have used appropriation to critique and satirize mass media or to abstract and re-contextualize works from art history. But Stark uses appropriation to inflate and generate renewed discussion around a highly relevant idea. Too much is at stake for artists to fuss around with overly-conceptual work. Stark wants us to engage.

Lyle Ashton Harris, *Once (Now) Again*



Artist Lyle Ashton Harris

Bronx-born artist Lyle Ashton Harris utilizes a broad artistic practice comprising photography, collage, installation art, and performance art to contextualize his personal life as a queer black man alongside broader histories of activism and social progress. His Whitney Biennial installation, *Once (Now) Again* is part of a larger ongoing project, the Ektachrome Archive, made up of slide images shot between 1986 and 1998, photographic prints from Harris's journals, and diaristic video works. The slide images are projected intermittently on three podium like stands. I watched the slides shift for some time, and found myself faced with beautiful images of Harris's friends, family and lovers. His video pieces in the installation are remarkably intimate, as if Harris wants to invite viewers into those most precious moments of his life. Harris's archive find him placed front and center in several seminal moments for civil freedoms and progressive humanity: the emergence of multiculturalism, the second wave of AIDS activism, and the interconnection 'of the contemporary art scene with LGBTQ and African diasporic communities.' Harris has the humanity to acknowledge himself as a political being and the bravery to place himself in the context of political and social history for a viewing public. His work is a powerful reminder than an artist at his/her best can only see the world through their very own eyes, and to ask the world to look through their eyes to gain new perspectives.

Deana Lawson



As a photographer, there are very few things in contemporary art that have more emotional impact on me than beautifully composed contemporary photographs with a powerful and unique aesthetic. And by any measure, Brooklyn-based photographer and Princeton photography professor Deana Lawson has one of the most singular photographic aesthetics in contemporary art. I first came across Lawson's work last year when her work graced the cover of experimental pop musician Blood Orange's excellent *Freetown Sound* album. The photograph, a couple embracing on a bed with the woman staring towards the camera while a poster of (or perhaps the ghost of) Michael Jackson stares at the couple, is emblematic of the evocative poetry that Lawson is able to imbue within minimal portraits inspired by domestic photography. In past works, Lawson has appropriated domestic portraits of black families, and in her photography she carefully composes these portraits to elevate this form of domestic photography and subvert the ways in which black bodies are often portrayed in American media. Intimacy, commitment, and self-love all manifest in her photographs. For example, in one photograph included in the Biennial entitled *Sons of Cush* a black man heavily tattooed and wearing his underwear above his pants is shown to be a tender and loving father to his infant son, marking contrast to the typical Hollywood portrayal of this man as a violent gangster (the picture also reminded me of Mahershala Ali's portrayal of the drug dealer character Juan in the Best Picture Academy Award-winning *Moonlight*). Lawson's photography emphasizes how just the subtlest twisting and subverting of cultural stereotypes can be a resonant and radical act of creativity.

Rafa Esparza



*Installation by Rafa Esparza, photographs by Dorian Ulices Lopez Macias*

Los Angeles-based artist Rafa Esparza built an entire installation made of adobe bricks that was displayed at The Whitney's first floor gallery. Esparza built this and structures like it out of dirt, hay and horse manure mixed with water from the Los Angeles river with the help of the artist's close friends and family. The work becomes politically potent when considering the portrayal that our Mexican citizens are currently receiving from our country's most powerful politicians, specifically the term "bad hombres" coined by Donald Trump. Esparza shines light on the craftsman techniques of the Mexican people, and reaffirms their humanity to the world. Esparza coopts this technique from his father who built his own home in Durango, Mexico with this same style of adobe brick laying. This style of art making also has a personal association for Esparza as well: his father taught him the technique just after Esparza came out to him as gay. The craft then becomes a kind of inter-generational passing of wisdom and a representation of acceptance and love between father and son. Esparza also questions the streamlined nature of the presentation of art, as the structure is also being used to display works by other artists in the Biennial. One of those artists is Dorian Ulices Lopez Macias whose photographic portraits of brown people accentuates the political power of the installation.

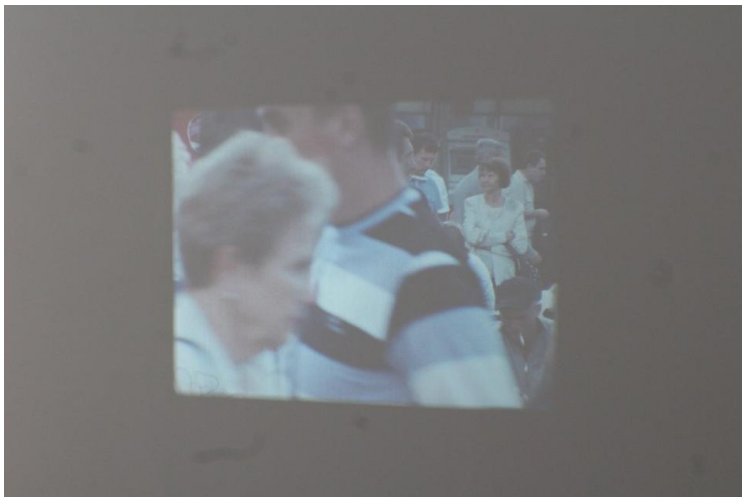
## KAYA



Installation by KAYA

Painter Kerstin Brätsch and sculptor Debo Eilers comprise the artist duo KAYA. The duo, formed in 2010, took its name from the project's muse and collaborator Kaya Serene, the daughter of a mutual friend who was thirteen when she started working with Brätsch and Eilers. KAYA's output intersects painting, sculpture and performance and forms a kind of mutated aesthetic with decayed abstract paintings in slimy shades of green, purple and orange and massive totemic sculptures forged from found materials (industrial shower curtains, vinyl rope, black trash bags). Art in America has labeled Brätsch one of the 'major painters of her generation,' and noted the appealing contrast between her painterly approach and Eilers' sculptures, "These collaborations are often unfussy, engrossing and confusing affairs." I would have to agree. The pieces in the Biennial, several paintings and large-scale sculptures, seem to invoke the bliss of childhood creativity. Inspired not only by Kaya's frame (several of the sculptures are abstractions of the young girl herself) but also in her burgeoning sense of Kaya's identity as an artist, KAYA reminds the viewer of art's ability to portal one into the fantastical. With so much political hostility, art making can be a reprieve as much as a confrontation.

## Leigh Ledare, *Vozka*



I have come to know and love Brooklyn-based artist Leigh Ledare's extremely confrontational photography, collage, and appropriated images culled from fashion editorials, pornography and commerce. Ledare was once assistant to iconic photographer Larry Clark and has acquired his mentor's taste for using shocking and disturbing imagery to arouse conversation. His best known work, *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, presents a series of photographs that capture Leigh's mother (a former dancer) while posing in lingerie, masturbating, and having sex while chronicling her deteriorating health. In other

words, Ledare's art is not for the faint of heart. But his Biennial presentation, a video projection entitled *Vozkal*, felt like an aesthetic, if not a thematic, departure from the ultra-provocateur imagery Ledare got famous with. A film split into three 16 mm projections assembled randomly throughout a space, *Vozkal* captures the social interactions of hundreds of Russian citizens loitering, working in, or passing through a Moscow train station. What is so fascinating about the projections is that while you watch the citizens go about their days, they at first seem like they are free to do what they want. But a creeping sense of dread builds throughout the piece as you begin to notice perilous looking men lurking about, perhaps policing or spying on the area. It reminds the viewer that a modern society falls into chaos and fear quietly. With the Trump administration's dubious Russian dealings, the piece takes on an even more sinister tone.

Tuan Andrew Nguyen, *The Island*



*Still captured from 'The Island' by Tuan Andrew Nguyen*

Vietnamese artist Tuan Andrew Nguyen and his family were among the 250,000 people who lived on the small island Palau Bidong (just off the coast of Malaysia) that in the wreckage of The Vietnam War served as the largest and longest-operating refugee camp in history. That island serves as the location for Nguyen's short film (and Biennial contribution) *The Island*. Set in a dystopian future, the film follows literally the last man on earth who, having escaped forced repatriation to Vietnam, finds a UN scientist who has washed up on shore following the world's last great nuclear war. The film is deeply personal to the artist and as much can be felt in its beautifully shot exteriors and chilling atmosphere. It also could not be presented at a more necessary time. The mere fact that something as tragic as the Syrian refugee crisis can become as deeply politicized as it is is testament to how deeply selfish contemporary society has become. These people are by and large not terrorists. They are humans: desperate, hungry, and in need. The political right seeks to dehumanize those who have lost the most basic needs of humanity: food and shelter. And behind every refugee, every single misplaced person, lies a tragedy. Nguyen's short film evokes that tragedy through stylized artistry. Like all great filmmakers, Nguyen is able to find his themes through the building of mood and tone. He is truly a magnificent artist.



Ajay Kurian, *Childermass*



“Something gets so close to not being, that’s when it becomes radically powerful and evocative. When a shape is just about to take form or when it is just about to disappear, it becomes beautiful,” once said Baltimore-born, Brooklyn-based artist Ajay Kurian. That quote makes sense when viewing Kurian’s Biennial contribution *Childermass*, an installation of humanoid sculptures that currently are assembled alongside the rails in-between The Whitney’s spiral staircase as if climbing up the building itself. Kurian worked as a curator before he started exhibiting his own work in 2011, and brings that curator’s sensibility to the way he assembles these pieces. He adorns his menacing and surreal characters, including children who are part animal and part machine, moon men, and a chrome chameleon (that Kurian views as ‘open, changeable, and tyrannical’), in a variety of subtext imbued pop cultural objects. The objects look akin to the subjects of Francis Bacon paintings placed in a contemporary setting; grotesque and mutated figurines adorned in streetwear. One such character wears Nike sneakers and a white t-shirt, key markers of laid-back American streetwise cool. A matronly female character wears sweatpants capris, much like the ones you see worn by alcoholics in rehab. Somewhere up this chain of figures, a loose and incommunicable narrative is formed. For some reason, while looking at this installation I found myself wondering that if a nuclear bomb went off or a chemical weapon was released that altered our bodies, would our belongings remain the same? Perhaps I’m way off base in my reading, but I enjoy art that leaves me with such off-putting responses.

Kamasi Washington, *Harmony of Difference*



Apparently while he wasn't collaborating with Kendrick Lamar on the genius hip-hop superstar's seminal 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly* or single-handedly renewing popular culture's interest in jazz with his 2015 record *Epic*, Los Angeles-based jazz composer and saxophonist Kamasi Washington found the time to contribute a six movement suite, entitled *Harmony of Difference*, to the Biennial that explores the musical philosophy of counterpoint, defined by Washington as "the art of balancing similarity and difference to create harmony between separate melodies." The first five movements are all original compositions, and the sixth fuses all five previous suites into one composition and is played alongside a video projection. Jazz already carries a multitude of associations: non-verbal communication, the creative spirit of improvisation, multiculturalism, and black iconoclasm. Jazz has long served as a way for musicians to both find themselves as individuals while learning to establish that identity alongside other musicians: John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* would not sound like it does without McCoy Tyner's piano alongside Trane's Saxophone, and one certainly can't imagine Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* without John McLaughlin's guitar stylings influencing Davis to think of ways to use his trumpet outside conventional jazz methodology. It was a smart curatorial move to include Washington in the Biennial that is all about identity and what it means to be a human right now. For almost a century Jazz has been instrumental in shaping the history of black art and birthed countless iconic black artists. Washington is ushering that tradition into a new era.

*The 2017 Whitney Biennial opens to the general public this Friday, March 17*