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## Whitney Biennial 2017 Review: Aesthetics Are Alive Downtown

By [Peter Plagens](#), The Wallstreet Journal

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While there may not be as many ways to look at the Whitney Biennial as there are to skin a cat, several immediately come to mind. The most popular approach is to consider the show as a single, big work of art and then compare it with previous Biennials. Another, for the culturati, is suggested in one of the wall texts in this year's version (the 78th since 1932 -- for many of those years, the survey was an annual), which states that the exhibition "provid[es] deep thinking and reflection on cultural concerns." Dealers, collectors and ambitious students try to tote up who's up or down and what's in fashion or out. Finally, unusual as it may be these days, there's going through the exhibition in search of a few works of art that offer a genuine aesthetic experience.

The 2017 Biennial offers rewards to all those groups. Selected by Christopher Y. Lew (on staff at the Whitney) and Mia Locks (an independent curator), both in their mid-30s, the exhibition is concise (only 63 artists), and in its spacious new digs, the Renzo Piano building that opened in May 2015, it can breathe. High-end gimcrackery -- practically a Biennial trademark -- looks more dignified than usual, and despite the show's sociological bent, there's little temptation to count up the number of women and minority artists to see how it squares with our ideas of progress. The old game of assessing the relative clout of the commercial galleries also seems irrelevant. In short, this Biennial is decorously political while at the same time good-looking -- a kind of "Masterpiece Theatre" version of the infamous 1993 ("I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White") edition.

Choosing individually meritorious works of art in a trendily encyclopedic exhibition such as this -- especially with the pixie dust of recently departed art fairs still in the air -- is highly subjective. I would go with Jessi Reaves's elegantly distressed assemblage "Lamp for Rancid Tree House" (2017) -- almost for the title alone -- and "Body Sized Shelf With Zippers" (2017). That both are redolent of the great -- and arcane -- Bruce Nauman isn't bothersome. In fact the immaterial presence of Mr. Nauman looms over the entire show.

I also spent a lot of time in Lyle Ashton Harris's room, "Once (Now) Again" (2017), which contains separately labeled video works, a three-channel projection of conspicuously un-art-y photographs of people, parties and dinners, some silk panels, and a music soundtrack. Despite a seemingly cobbled-together installation, the Warholian spirit is captivating. Also recommended are the large-format color photographs of Louisiana from 2015 and 2016 by An-My Le, and Kaari Upson's pigmented aluminum-and-urethane abstract sculptures from this year and last. (If there's a disappearing mode in contemporary art, it's the single-object sculpture that isn't an ironic replica of something else.)

One perennial problem with the Biennial -- especially this year's, in the architectural clarity of the new building -- is that many ostensibly "new" works have such obvious direct antecedents. Matt Browning's carved wooden grids allude to the obsessive, "senseless" labor of Tim Hawkinson that slyly says, "There must be an easier way to make this." Tala Madani's smallish nocturnal paintings contain the kind of de rigueur bad taste (they hinge on anal matters) that's overrun the art world during the past couple of generations. And the great big work of art that includes other people's works of art -- for example, the

group Occupy Museums' installation in a cutaway wall, "Debtfair," an expose of how much money aspiring artists need to borrow to earn art degrees and maintain themselves afterward -- is getting a little tired.

But what about painting? -- the question always asked about every Biennial in the same way one inquires about that old uncle at a family reunion. The answer is that there's a lot of it in the show, mostly figurative and expressionist, and -- if you look closely through the un-academic drawing -- skilled. (Think Alice Neel and Maria Lassnig as patron saints.) Several of the painters -- Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, Henry Taylor and the dependable Dana Schutz -- are quite good; with the new building and (I'd guess) more expensive carpentry, painting finally no longer has to fight for survival against the sounds and vibrating walls of nearby installations.

Every Biennial contains a couple of did-you-see? popular hits. In 2017, the two are likely to be by Pope.L aka William Pope.L and Raul de Nieves. "Claim (Whitney Version)" 2017, Pope.L's large box room, is festooned on the outside with slices of real bologna dripping grease and arranged in a grid, mimicking round dots on a chart. The smell, surprisingly, isn't unpleasant and the artist's jibe at coldly translating flesh-and-blood beings into data spots registers immediately. Mr. De Nieves has installed a faux-stained-glass window across the entire surface of the huge Whitney window that overlooks the city and, in front of it, has positioned some larger-than-life-size, vaguely figurative sculptures coated in beads and glitter. Whatever their meaning, backlighting caused by the glare coming through the colored acetate obscures it almost totally.

Part of the impressiveness of this Biennial comes from its obviously high production values. I asked a Whitney official about the show's budget, mentioning that movie companies provide that information. The response, which came with a smile, was, "We don't give that out, but it was certainly much less than the \$300 million Disney spent on its remake of 'Beauty and the Beast.'" Which might be, by the way, not a bad working title for the 2019 Whitney Biennial.