

10 Art Works You Must See At The 2017 Whitney Biennial

Adam Lehrer, CONTRIBUTOR

I write about New York's art gallery system and museum structure.

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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.

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.

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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.

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