

The Journal of Modern Craft

Volume 10—Issue 3

November 2017

pp. 331–336

DOI:

10.1080/17496772.2017.1394531

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Exhibition Review

2017 Whitney Biennial

2017 Whitney Biennial Produced by The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 17–June 11, 2017, Curated by Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks

Exhibition catalog: Jason Best with Domenick Ammirati and Deidre O'Dwyer, eds. *Whitney Biennial 2017*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art 2017)

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Upon entering the Whitney Museum of American Art's lobby for this 2017 Biennial, viewers are immediately greeted with a crafted presence. In stark contrast to the cold, Scandinavian-feeling architecture, hanging from the ceiling of the entrance lobby is Cauleen Smith's *In the Wake* (2017), a fleet of hand-sewn and applied fabric banners emblazoned with sequins, embellished trims and depictions of gun violence, bleeding organs, microphones and dark poem fragments (Figure 1). Evocative of the table-runner components of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, but with distinctive riffs on home-made church flags and protest banners, they are both ominous and empowering. Beckoning us forward into an institutional space seemingly reclaimed by homegrown activist aesthetics, Smith's bold messages crafted from humble materials set the tone for an exhibition trying to piece together an American society riven by fractious politics.

The first biennial to take place in the new building makes excellent use of two of the capacious floors, along with side installations on the first floor, the roof decks, and in the stairwell. It is overall a sparer biennial than the 2014 and 2012 editions, with fewer artists but more substantive bodies of work representing their inclusion. Paintings and two-dimensional works in general predominate in the show, with a smattering of sculptures and installations, three of which are audience-immersive. Notably, there is much less photography, film/video, performance and new media than biennials past.



Fig 1 Cauleen Smith, *In the Wake*, 2017. Satin, poly-satin, quilted pleather; upholstery, wool felt, wool velvet, indigo-dyed silk-rayon velvet, indigo-dyed silk satin, embroidery floss, metallic thread, acrylic fabric paint, acrylic hair beads, acrylic hair barrettes, satin cord, polyester fringe, poly-silk tassels, plastic-coated paper; and sequins. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist; courtesy Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago, and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

Curators Mia Locks and Christopher Y. Lew felt compelled to explore the questions of “Americanness” that have been raised in this tumultuous past election year. As their catalog statement reveals, Locks and Lew came to understand the art landscape they were surveying as one that has felt under siege as the election of Donald J. Trump wears on: “We’re in a moment when things feel beyond us, or so hugely problematic that one response is to focus on locality, a sense of responsibility to the people around you, to your community.”¹

Rightly so, their curation became a collaborative effort with other curators and writers who could help them comprehend the breadth of artists’ experiences during this polarizing, yet generative time. Though

not without controversy, the resulting exhibition addresses racial inequities, socioeconomic realities of artists’ lives, immigration, isolation and multifarious forms of systemic oppression—nearly all through an unapologetically complicated American lens. In what seems a deliberate turn from past biennials, the exhibition’s roster of sixty-three artists or collectives is comprised roughly of 50% persons of color and 50% women. In an unprecedented (for the biennial) activist gesture of inclusion, three of the curated artists/collectives selected works by forty-two other artists to include in their installations.

In contrast to many large biennial-style shows from the past several years, the 2017 Whitney Biennial seems to snub the slick design sensibilities and fabricated futurisms

that increasingly predominate in various corners of the contemporary art world. The curators recognize that

many of the artists are working in ways that are not ironic but deeply sincere. They are less engaged with corporate aesthetics, and there's an earnestness that cuts through any notion of camp or style, that gets closer to the functional ... These artists aren't just retooling the pop that's out there, they're actually trying to get to an underlying sensibility that feels deeply urgent.²

Despite curatorial focus on locality, community and function within American art, efforts by Locks and Lew to fold craft practices into these dialogs remains unconvincing. This biennial does a good job of asking viewers to reconsider what constitutes social practice by not offering go-to examples. Many included artists' work for or in communities, such as Rafa Esparza's adobe brick wall created to display Hispanic artists' work; others create works that speak to entire communities, like the photographs of black American families by Deana Lawson or the indigenous Alaskan film by Sky Hopinka. And while social practice grew most auspiciously out of contemporary sculpture and performance fields, it has deeper roots in craft communities where techniques and material processing needs necessitate community involvement and engagement. Examples abound of political responses to crises of national identity through craft community practices from Gandhi's spinning cotton khadi cloth to Suffragette quilting bees, the AIDS Quilt to today's Pink Pussy Hat movement.

The more obvious examples of craft included in this biennial are, perhaps, some

of the most politically deflated works in the show. Matt Browning's elegant wood sculptures are carved from a single large slab of pine and whittled down into separated oval rings are suspended tension (Figure 2). A nod to serial practices by artists such as Sol Lewitt, Browning's *Untitled* (2016) series is installed on multiple floors in iterations of two or three tightly gridded formations. Comprised of a large Navajo-woven wool rug that the artist designed, Ulrike Müller's work *Some* (2017) uses geometric shapes in minimal abstract compositions; a grid of paintings on paper, and a series of small enameled plates in conjunction with the rug. Within this biennial, Browning and Müller seem to simultaneously fetishize both Minimalist painting movements and "high craft."

Though I am uninterested in reifying binary stratifications of "high" and "low" craft, I was definitely more engaged by the artworks that marshaled class dynamics using cheap, easily accessible materials, DIY aesthetics and informal handskills in ways that harken to domestic hobbies, communal living, protests, tinkering—a celebratory and complicated "craft of the people." Works by Jessi Reaves, Raúl de Nieves and Cauleen Smith eschew high production values for a more democratic approach to materials and handmaking.

Jessi Reaves' furniture is peppered throughout the exhibition and provides an almost comical rejoinder to some of the more polished works. Funky settees, couches, armchairs and shelves are assembled by strapping foam, fabric, wood, iron and recycled clothing together; while works such as *Ottoman with Parked Chairs* (2017) (Figure 3) become amorphous sitting islands carefully upholstered from jacquard-woven fabric. Reaves' work speaks to the need to bridge divides across art and non-art

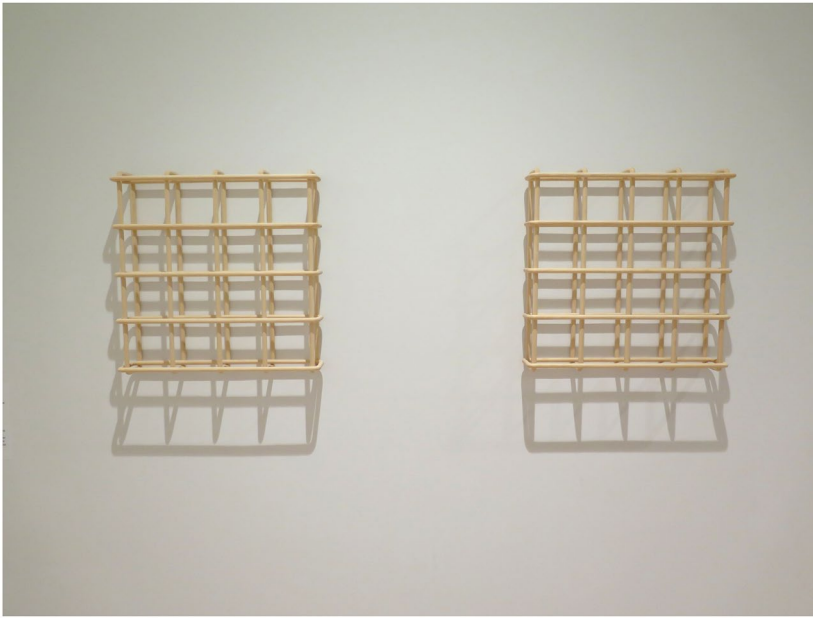


Fig 2 Matt Browning, *Untitled*, 2016. Wood. Expanded: 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ " \times 4." Collection of the artist.



Fig 3 Jessi Reaves, *Ottoman with Parked Chairs*, 2017. Plywood, polyurethane upholstery foam, metal, tapestry blankets, silk, cord, thread, and hardware. Dimensions variable. Collection of the artist; courtesy Bridget Donahue, New York.

audiences—a goal reached as I observed numerous gallery-goers sink into these functional pieces with a sense of relief and bewilderment that art could be touched.

Laborious and enticingly haptic, the installation of Raúl de Nieves wows us with its obsessive accumulations and inventive narrative forms. In *Man's best friend* (2016) (Figure 4), eccentric opera costumes are crafted with lace-like swirling lines of acrylic yarn, and adorned with opulent masses of cheap beads, rhinestones and decorator trims, referencing the festive craftsmanship of his native Mexico. The figures and coral-like formations of pony beads are foregrounded by *beginning & the end neither & the otherwise betwixt & between the end is the beginning & the end* (2016), a stained-glass takeover of the massive gallery windows, an uncanny facsimile made from black gaffer tape and bright acetate sheets. Twenty-odd panels depict images of suffering and subjugation, with large hovering flies invading the scenes. The majesty conferred by the historical, political and social weight of stained-glass becomes darkly cheap in de Nieve's faux version.

Cauleen Smith's appliquéd banners in the lobby, as well as on the fifth floor, preach loudly-but-silently: "Rage blooms within me." Her sentiments reverberate in this deeply divisive American time: who isn't full of rage? An experimental filmmaker who works in a range of materials and styles, her banners—stitched by eleven credited artists³—were originally conceived for a film procession scene, but became more potent as objects in and of themselves.⁴ They convey icon-like text and image reflections on the now regular videos of police killings and assault of black people. Given the proximity of

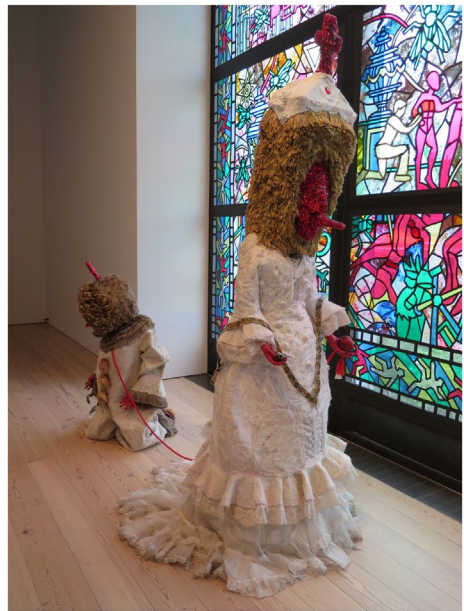


Fig 4 Raúl de Nieves, *Man's best friend*, 2016. Yarn, fabric, glue, beads, cardboard, found trim, and mannequin. Dimensions variable. Courtesy Company Gallery, New York.

Smith's work to near-daily Black Lives Matter protests of Dana Schutz's controversial painting of Emmett Till's open casket, as well as the curators' preference for artists working "sincerely and with deep urgency," I was initially surprised that the banners were not being taken down and used regularly. Unactivated and out of reach, they seemed to hang more in a post-protest state of mourning. On the contrary, these pre-protest banners were hanging in a state of waiting. Myself and most visitors missed a critical program in which Smith collaborated on a public banner-making workshop led by her fellow Chicagoan Aram Han Sifuentes, whose Protest Banner Lending Library handcrafts and lends protest banners for various anti-oppression causes.⁵ As the Dana Schutz

debates ended precariously on the limits of empathy, *In the Wake* provides the opposite: regenerative proclamation. The banners of Smith and Han Sifuentes will have second lives just now beginning, as they are marched with by other protesters.

These collective works probe a politics of materiality and foreground the urgency of making as an antidote to political anguish. While still occupying a marginal status in the 2017 edition, it is no less refreshing to see deliberate craft practices and materials in this biennial. It might seem the curators included these artists and craft-oriented practices to lend a certain kind of authenticity to their show—to deflect the post-studio, conceptually difficult works and “in crowd” irony that have become hallmarks of large international biennials. Regardless of their motivations, the inclusion of this spectrum of practices illuminates the political, community and human potential of craft in turbulent times.

Notes

- 1 Jason Best with Domenick Ammirati and Deidre O'Dwyer (eds), *Whitney Biennial 2017* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2017), p. 19.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- 3 Banners sewn by: Keeley Haftner, Elgee King, Jinn Bronwen Lee, Kate S. Lee, Elizabeth Van Loan, April Martin, Nicole Mauser, Magritte Emanuel Nankin, Carolina Poveda, Darling Shear, Danielle Wordelman.
- 4 Craig Hubert, Interview with Cauleen Smith. “A Moving Image Artist Finds Freedom after Abandoning the Film Industry,” *Hyperallergic* (March 24, 2017). Available at: <https://hyperallergic.com/367406/a-moving-image-artist-finds-freedom-after-abandoning-the-film-industry/> (accessed September 7, 2017).
- 5 Whitney Museum, “Protest Banner Lending Library with Aram Han Sifuentes and Cauleen Smith” on the “Events” page. Available at: <https://whitney.org/Events/ProtestBannerLendingLibrary> (accessed September 10, 2017).