

A User's Guide to the Whitney Biennial

By Jason Farago

March 8, 2017

Everything had to be reinvented for the 2017 Whitney Biennial — the first to take place in the new riverside home of the Whitney Museum. But then, this leading showcase of contemporary American art feels refreshed in other ways, too.

In a generational shift, the Whitney has chosen two young curators for this always anticipated exhibition: Christopher Y. Lew, 36, and Mia Locks, 34. It's also the first time that the biennial's curators are both people of color. After months on the road, they have boiled down the art of the last few years into a survey that, for all its energy, doesn't overwhelm the museum.

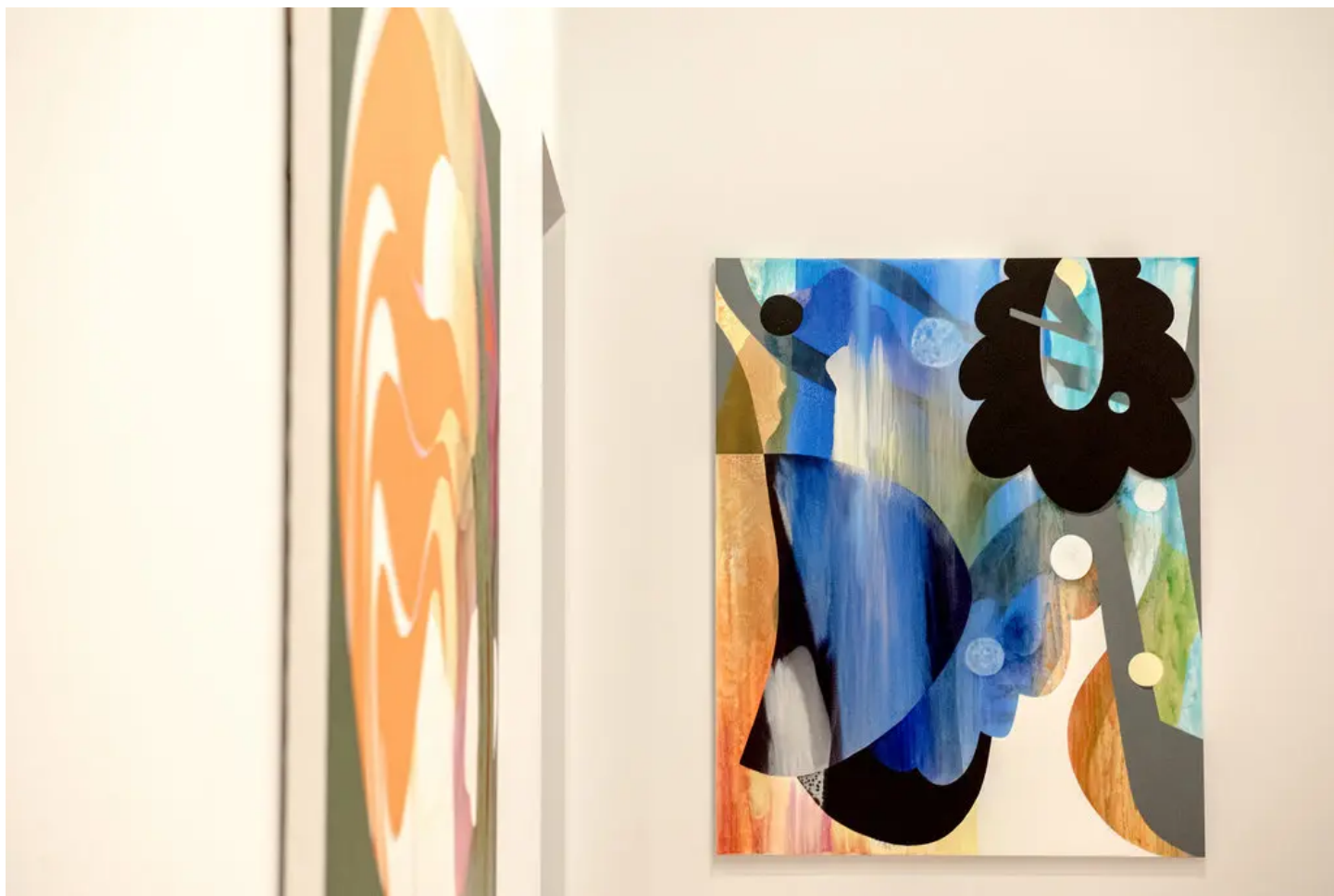
The biennial will always be a show people like to fight about. But before the arguments and debates begin, let me tell you about a walk I took with the pair through the in-progress installation. What follows is a user's guide to the 78th Whitney Biennial, which opens to the public on March 17. (My colleague Roberta Smith will publish her review on that date.)



A stained-glass window and sculptures, all by Raúl de Nieves, at the Whitney Biennial. Collection of the artist; courtesy Company Gallery, New York; Photograph by George Etheredge for The New York Times

The Run-Up

The show is ambitious, but it's tight. There are 63 participants, which puts it back on the scale of the 2010 and 2012 biennials after the hundred-artist-plus blowout of 2014. Though it occupies only two floors of the new building, and much of the lobby, the exhibition enjoys more square footage than in its previous, Marcel Breuer-designed home. The curators have also capitalized on the Whitney's enviable cityside balconies, which will feature art both massive (a suite of red laminated glass boxes by the West Coast veteran Larry Bell) and invisible (a sound work by the young artist Zarouhie Abdalian). Even the floor-to-ceiling windows of the building's fifth floor have been overtaken by a riotously colorful composition from the artist Raúl de Nieves, which will be visible from the street after nightfall.



Paintings by Carrie Moyer at the biennial. George Etherege for The New York Times

There's Painting — Lots of Painting

Surprise! Though new media is not in short supply here, Mr. Lew and Ms. Locks have also sought out acres of oil and acrylic on canvas, primarily by women. Painters here include the 87-year-old Jo Baer, a Minimalist who later moved into a more poetic vein; midcareer figures such as Dana Schutz, Frances Stark, Carrie Moyer and Ulrike Müller; and younger artists such as Shara Hughes, an abstractionist, and Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, who paints fragile scenes of daily Los Angeles life. In many cases, these painters' works are installed in contemplative single-artist galleries.

One discovery is Aliza Nisenbaum, a Mexican-born artist who paints portraits of immigrants, some of whom have entered the country illegally, as well as still lifes of handwritten letters pinned to bulletin boards. They build on the 18th-century tradition of trompe l'oeil painting, but have a darker cast. "She was corresponding with a very close family member who's incarcerated," Ms. Locks explained, "and so these are portraits of that person through the letters."

Economics Is a Major Theme

Cameron Rowland, a young New York artist, has recently mounted several exhibitions whose everyday objects conceal vicious economic realities, such as compulsory inmate labor, at well below minimum wage, in New York prisons. Here he has steered the Whitney to invest \$25,000 in a social impact bond — a newish financial instrument in which profits are indexed to real-life outcomes. This one yields if a certain social initiative can "reduce recidivism among medium- to high-risk offenders." In other words, the museum will make money if ex-cons don't go back to jail.

Other artists looking at economic matters include Irena Haiduk, who has created a digital apparatus for museumgoers to purchase public land in Serbia, after a privatization measure recently adopted in that country. The collective Occupy Museums has one of the show's rare polemical projects: a destroyed wall whose cavity contains works by artists in sometimes crippling debt.



A production photograph for "The Island" (2017), by Tuan Andrew Nguyen. courtesy the artist

Identity Matters. But It Isn't Simple.

Black, Latino and Asian artists are well represented in this biennial — which hasn't always been the case for editions past. Yet Mr. Lew and Ms. Locks have steered away from direct advocacy, and many artists here, from the photographer Deana Lawson to the filmmaker Tuan Andrew Nguyen, approach questions of identity with dreaminess, nostalgia, satire and wit.

One of the show's senior figures is the Chicago artist William Pope.L — who facetiously called himself "the friendliest black artist in America," and whose views on race and self are wildly unfixated. Here he reworks a 2014 installation in which hundreds of slices of bologna are fixed with small, hard-to-decipher photos. Mr. Pope.L suggests in an adjacent text that the photos represent Jewish people — but then again, the sitters may not be Jewish at all. Take the pungent bologna any way you like it. Ms. Locks put it this way: "I love the idea that it's this perfect grid, this perfect system, with the most false, sloppy data points you've ever seen. Literally deteriorating."

It's Bicoastal, but Regional, Too

Compared with the organizers of the 2014 biennial, who hung a floor apiece in the old Breuer building, this year's curators are a simpatico pair. Mr. Lew is an associate curator at the Whitney. Ms. Locks is an independent curator who recently left MoMA PS1 — and Mr. Lew is an alum of that museum, too. They finish each other's sentences. They struggle to recall which of them first proposed a number of the artists on view.

Though many artists here come from the country's two big art capitals, the pair's year of travels has yielded other discoveries. Maya Stovall, from Detroit, has contributed videos that document performances outside liquor stores in the down-at-the-heels Motor City. And there are multiple artists from Puerto Rico, whose continuing Greek-style debt crisis also informed the curators' thinking about art and economics. A Puerto Rican design firm, Tiguer Corporation, has designed the biennial's compact catalog.



The biennial's curators, Christopher Lew and Mia Locks. Scott Rudd

The duo also relied on a committee of advisers from inside the museum (Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney's chief curator) and outside, like the writer Negar Azimi.

"We would meet for full days, have dinner together," Mr. Lew explained. "One time we were all in the same giant Airbnb —"

"Like 'The Real World,'" Ms. Locks interjected. "It became a nice punctuation point for our process. Obviously, we've been in a deep collaborative hole, and we spend way too much time together" — they both laughed — "so it's nice to get outside your own head once in a while."

Trump Is Present, Not Dominant

When the Whitney's curators planned the museum's first exhibitions in its new home, they postponed the biennial a year to concentrate on the permanent collection. That had an unexpected side effect. For the first time since the show's 1997 edition, biennial curators traversed the United States during a presidential election — one rather less tranquil than the Clinton-Dole matchup. A few works here touch directly on national politics, like Ms. Dupuy-Spencer's drawings of a Trump rally, or the New Orleans reportage of the photographer An-My Lê. But Mr. Lew and Ms. Locks did not rework their list of artists after Nov. 8. The election's themes were already present in the art.

For Ms. Locks, "When people keep talking about racism, when people keep talking about inequity, when people keep talking about debt — when conversations come around without you bringing it up — you realize: These are the ideas!"

The artists were caught "in a moment of collective self-reflection, introspection, soul-searching," she added. "And in a way, that has become part of the show."

A correction was made on March 9, 2017: An earlier version of this article misstated the closing date of this year's Whitney Biennial. It runs from March 17 through June 11.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

Whitney Biennial
March 17 through June 11.
Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, Manhattan; whitney.org.

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