

ARTEFUSE

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HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE 2019 WHITNEY BIENNIAL

By Jonathan Goodman



Walter Price, *The things that horse ourselves for uncertainty*, 2018.

Every two years the Whitney Biennial comes around, and almost always one is a bit disappointed. This year, the exhibition is dominated by political art; the show reflects our current, intense concern with gender and racial equality, as made manifest by work that approaches these themes regularly in ways that reflect older art historical perspectives. At the same time, it must be said that, formally speaking, there was very little that was new. The innovations in art are now social and political, while the work in this exhibition is mostly conventional—oriented toward painting, sculpture, photography and video. Many of the artists participating are women or persons of black heritage; many of them convey both a politics and a psychology of marginal feeling. Perhaps it can be said that the insistence on social concerns narrows the width of possible subject matter; there is the danger of political correctness, now problematic in the art world. But, at the same time, these concerns are real, being based as they are on histories of prejudice and willful mistreatment. Inevitably, the wish to resolve visual problems and the need to be (didactically) confrontational about current mores and biases pushes artists toward a disconnect. Visuals remain visuals, usually free of content, while the literalism of much political art directs it toward a stiflingly narrow spectrum.

Thus, the current biennial reflects both our present social and political beliefs, even as it leans toward the traditional in its facture. Eclecticism is present, and it has been heavily present in our art for at least two or three generations (it is also true that eclecticism has been present in art since its beginnings). If we consider that America comprises many, many different kinds of people, eclecticism in art can be seen as inevitable. It is also the result of Internet access to images from anywhere across history. Eclecticism in politicized art works quite well in that it enables the artist to pull other examples supporting his or her work from other cultures; the juxtaposition of visual materials allows a common ground to be determined, so as to shore up the point being made. But reaching across time and geography

to establish a political insight can weaken that insight; this happens because the examples taken are too distant to fully connect. As a result, the content of the political assertion stands less supported than it might seem. In most of the art in the Biennial, we can see that the politics is indirect; statements are not laid out flatly. Rather, they are suggested—with certain extreme exceptions, such as the bloody word “DYKE” cut into the skin of a woman in a photograph by Elle Pérez.

To repeat: in most of the work seen here, the assertions are implied—for example, the sculpture *Cupboard VIII* (2018) by Simone Leigh, consists of a ceramic head, which looks a lot like it comes out of African tribal art sculpture, and an out-size raffia skirt. Reading the notes associated with the piece, we find that Leigh is a highly engaged black feminist artist. Certainly, this is true, but the work does not present Leigh’s beliefs as an open declaration. Instead, there are associations being made between form and materials and African culture. These associations are, in Leigh’s case, more suggested than direct. But the indirection makes for a much better art statement, evading as it does the literalism that plagues much contemporary art today. Leigh’s work here is formally significant; it plays off ties she has made genuine by virtue of her cultural and technical insights. Beyond that, though, is the simple fact of the sculpture’s esthetic virtue: it is an outstanding piece of art. The background of thinking the artist subscribes to is implied rather than stated, making it eloquent in ways that would not survive a transparently social assertion.

Not all of the art is politicized. Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu is presenting us with three sculptures, I will focus on two, *Sentinel I* and *Sentinel II*, both from 2018. Slightly larger than lifesize, made with parts of wood paper pulp and embellished with decorative objects, the two works stand with genuine presence. *Sentinel I*, clearly a female figure with breasts, has a desiccated wooden branch for a head. Both works manage to suggest abstraction as well as a figurative slant, since their individual components, if separated from each other, look nonobjective. The sculptures also feel like they exist in the interstice between African and Western sculpture. In the painting *The things that horse ourselves for uncertainty* (2018), Walter Price opts for a manner distinctly related to abstract painting of earlier generations in America. This work, red and orange in background color, consists of various undifferentiated shapes—black and mauve amorphous smudges among them. The painting cannot have come into existence without the prior standing of abstract work, yet it manages to exist very well as a contemporary example of the genre. The general messiness of the shapes, deliberately at odds with each other in the composition, suggests a free-floating amalgam of independent creativity. At the same time, the work owes at least part of its force to the tradition it belongs to. Price’s painting shows how the strong legacy of abstract expressionism enables the artist to work within a style whose highest point occurred in the middle of the last century.

Deaf since birth, artist Christine Sun Kim’s series of drawings, chronicling deaf anger, begin and end within a place of rage. Yet the works are elegantly drawn, being charcoal and oil stick on paper. The contrast between the kinds of rage distinguished in the work *Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World* (2018) and the visual attractiveness of the work animates the piece to no end. Phrases like “Guggenheim Accessibility Manager,” accompanying a thin piece of a black circle hemmed in by two extended lines, document a psychic state named “Acute Rage” beneath the image. Six kinds of rage are distinguished in the drawing, each of which is illustrated by a circle or part of one. The imagery, schematic in the extreme, nonetheless illustrates Kim’s particular circumstances. As a result, the work, beginning as a feeling, ends up as a diagram. So, even though Kim’s work is regularly shaped by her own situation, she records her emotions abstractly, without evidencing her situation. Since it is impossible to evidently delineate a feeling, Kim is forced to record her anger abstractly. The result is a merger of opposites.

In summary, the Biennial’s success is hard to determine. Esthetic judgment won’t work very well, although more than a few pieces are pleasing to the eye and well-made. But the visuals are secondary to the purpose of the show, which is to assert a barely hidden cultural militancy. Given the current state of retrenchment in American politics, this is an excellent thing to

do. At the same time, we are preaching to the choir. Cultural institutions, however progressive their rhetoric, remain institutions, which by their very nature are customary. Artists, being marginalized, will likely remain so despite the good intentions of the show. Some of the work can connect with a larger audience, but some of it can't. In our current culture, it is clear that fine art is not truly embraced, despite our increased audience. Art world politics are remarkably accurate in a political sense, but the terms of the imagery are often nonobjective, distanced from the artists' stance and requiring considerable intelligence to understand. Probably this is an obstacle to actual change. Because artistic efforts are now so divorced from the general culture, it is more than difficult for artists to step out of specialization. It looks like not much can be done.