# The 2017 Whitney Biennial—a survey of contemporary American art: What does it show?

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Every two years, the stated goal of the Biennial exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City is to capture the *zeitgeist*—"spirit of the times"—through a selection of what is considered representative contemporary artwork.

How effectively or exhaustively the outlook of the curators actually *permits* them to accomplish this ambitious goal, of course, is one question that might be asked before any other. That is to say, do the organizers of the Biennial almost inevitably tend to discover that the *zeitgeist* coincides with their own vantage point and social concerns?

In any event, this year's Biennial features art by 63 individuals and collectives whose work, the curators note, "arrives at a time rife with racial tensions, economic inequities, and polarizing politics."

On that basis, one might reasonably expect to find at least some interesting artwork reflecting aspects of the social reality confronting the majority of the population in 2017. Unfortunately, despite the wide variety of forms and media, from painting and installation to activism and video-game design, almost all the artists selected have framed their awareness of the present situation in terms of personal "identity," be it race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation. Social class, if it is included at all, is just an adjective in a longer list. Self-absorption and a devotion to the secondary remain very much on the order of the day.

Intended to showcase a new or rising generation, fully 75 percent of the artists (excluding the six collectives) in the Biennial are less than 50 years old, and more than half the artists were born since 1979. These younger artists have come of age in the US in the midst of almost permanent war and waves of social reaction. They have also matured during a period in which intense subjectivity, eclecticism and disregard for broader historical processes, influenced ideologically in general terms by various strands of postmodernism, have dominated in the visual arts.

The reactionary implications of this outlook erupted immediately upon the Biennial's opening in mid-March with the call for the suppression and even destruction of *Open Casket*, a painting by white artist Dana Schutz based on a photograph of the mutilated corpse of black youth Emmett Till, murdered in 1955 by white racists. The attempt to censor the painting was justified on the grounds that Schutz, as a white woman, had no right to "appropriate" the suffering of a black mother, or by extension of African Americans as a group even in artistic form.

The outcry only died down after Schutz promised she would never profit from the sale of the painting. There was also undoubtedly the general feeling in the media that the identity politics crowd had gone too far in this case with their demand that the painting should be physically destroyed. (See "The foul attempt to censor and suppress Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till")

Henry Taylor's painting *THE TIMES THAY AIN'T A CHANGING, FAST ENOUGH!*, a representation of Philandro Castile slumped back in his car moments after being shot by Minnesota police, an image that was live-streamed on Facebook in June 2016 by Castillo's girlfriend, provoked no protests, presumably because the artist in this case is black. It is ironic that in addition to treating generally similar subject matter, Schutz and

Taylor both employ a boldly colored, modernist figurative style to interpret their photographic sources.

Unhappily, the baleful influence and absurdities of gender and racial politics were widely on display at the Biennial. The descriptions of the works themselves all too often spoke the jargon of the upper middle class layer obsessed with itself and its experiences, passed off as "the intersection of the personal and the political."

Notable among the more intriguing work were paintings and drawings by Celeste Dupuy-Spencer (b. 1979). Her work includes a drawing of Trump supporters at a rally, the interior of a gay-bar turned sports-bar, and a group sitting out on the furniture-strewn lawn of their house after its sale. Her images are frequently cluttered with books, posters, record albums and computer screens indicating the various cultural and political influences on these lives, often of a left-leaning character. (See accompanying interview with Dupuy-Spencer.)

Other work of interest included a series of large-format photographs by John Divola (b. 1949), who since the 1970s has been photographing the interiors of abandoned houses in his native California. The photos are visually striking for their play of structure and color. Each image incorporates one of a trove of abandoned student paintings that Divola discovered in a dumpster. Those add an element of the human (most of the paintings are figurative) and suggest lives once lived in the otherwise geometrical spaces, adding another layer of loss and abandonment.

*Vozkal* (2016) by Leigh Ledare (b. 1976) is an hour-long multiscreen video shot in the area connecting three Moscow train stations. Commuters come and go engaged in the seemingly unexceptional behavior of such public, urban spaces. However, the armed police monitoring the scene, as well as a woman relieving herself behind some construction material, hint at a more grim social reality. Similarly, a documentary-style series of photographs by Oto Gillen (b. 1984) of New York City assembles fragments of life at street level juxtaposed with eerie shots of the artificially lit night sky and skyscrapers under construction.

Finally, in *Liquor Store Theater*, Detroit native Maya Stovall (b. 1982) and other dancers perform a mix of ballet and modern dance in the parking lot of a Detroit liquor store and interact with neighborhood residents as they speak about the conditions in the economically ravaged area.

However, the more compelling works are outnumbered by others that are overwrought conceptually, not very interesting artistically, and leavened with artwork that is fanciful, colorful, abstract, "lighter." Many of the works addressing economic issues are installation, or otherwise conceptual pieces with little or no aesthetic component. Remarkably, Irena Haiduk's piece, presented as text on the wall, invites *female* visitors only to buy shares in a *Frauenbank* to purchase land in the former Yugoslavia.

*Debtfair* by Occupy Museums, a group aligned with the Occupy protest movement that emerged in the US in 2011, is " a series of experimental market-actions to highlight—and potentially—redress the crippling debt many artists are incurring." Interesting and relevant information perhaps, but it requires the artist's working through social, even scientific material and transforming it by means of imagination to become art of a far more satisfying sort.

And noticeably absent among all the issues, many of them entirely legitimate, addressed in the Whitney Biennial—undocumented immigrants, the US-Mexico border wall, HIV-AIDS, the plight of the Aleut in the Bering Sea—are US imperialism's endless wars, the Obama administration and the political crisis emerging from the 2016 election, the attacks on democratic rights, social inequality—in short, the most fundamental issues confronting the population.

More thoughtful and farsighted artists of the rising generation will find they need to look beyond their personal "identities" and turn to the big historical and social issues of our time to create a new and more rewarding basis for their work.