Whitney Biennial 2026: Taking the pulse and finding it feeble

Clare Hurley
20 May 2026

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 8–August 23, 2026

Every two years, in the form of its biennial "survey" of contemporary work, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City maintains it is taking the pulse of the contemporary art scene in the US. And, furthermore, that the biennial is a means of gauging the overall state of American society. If the latter assertion is so, the art world and the society surrounding it are in very poor shape.

The 2026 biennial, which offers "an intergenerational and international group of fifty-six artists, duos, and collectives," is on view until August 23. The press has settled on "weird" to describe the 82nd biennial's mood and ambiance. One reviewer called it "cute" for the number of stuffed animals and squishy toys. We might suggest it indicates the artists on view are largely overwhelmed by the current political and social crisis and turbulence, and are incapable of organizing a coherent response.

According to Scott Rothkopf, the Whitney's director, the "weirdness" is intentional. "What (curators) Marcela (Guerrero) and Drew (Sawyer) have put together doesn't try to simplify the strangeness of our times," he said. "It allows visitors to encounter the world as artists are sensing it, structurally unstable and emotionally charged yet also full of possibility."

Structurally unstable it certainly is, but what is peculiar and disturbing, as one encounters the various efforts, is the absence of any concrete feeling for, let alone understanding of, the objective experiences of masses of people over the past two years. The return of a fascist to the US presidency, the ongoing establishment of an oligarchic dictatorship, attacks on immigrants and killings of protesters, launching of illegal wars and genocide—are just part of the "strangeness" of it all.

The overwhelmingly number of conceptual pieces in the show exemplifies this disconnect. (There were very few paintings, drawings, photographs or traditional sculptures included, even compared to previous biennials.) Even when significant issues are taken up—climate change, racial violence, the role of AI, the commodification of art—their "conceptual" frameworks lean toward absurdity rather than leading on to greater insight.

For example, quoting from the wall text, without which it is impossible to make any sense of what one is looking at:

> In *Everything wants to kill you and you should be afraid*, Precious Okoyomon (the artist) presents fifty-five suspended creatures with bodies sewn together with taxidermied bird wings and discarded children's toys salvaged from thrift stores. The resulting sculptures hang from nooses in reference to the history of racial violence in the United States. For Okoyomon, the angel-like forms are rife with contradictions. They are marked by both death and eternal life, defined by flight yet subject to gravity, and perpetually burdened by the weight of grief.

That's a good deal to draw from 55 stuffed animals hanging from the ceiling.

Other examples include 100 hand-crafted ceramic doggy chew toys intended to comfort a deceased service dog in the afterlife (Emilie Louise Gossiaux, *Kong Play, 2025*), clock gadgets with teeth speaking in the voices of dead artists generated by AI from their social media posts (Cooper Jacoby, *Estate*, 2025) and a life-size sculpture of an all-white charging horse collapsing exhausted into a bed of menstrual cups and inflated condoms (Anna Tsouhlarakis, *She Must Be a Matriarch* (2023).

A key aspect of contemporary conceptual art is the compulsion to fashion it directly from real objects (or substances or sounds), supposedly as a way of adding layers of meaning. So Isabelle Frances McGuire's ghoulish sculptures referencing the 1692 Salem witch trials are made from actual CT scans. Andrea Fraser's larger-than-life size sculptures of sleeping toddlers are fashioned from a fungal wax that never hardens (to indicate the fragility of childhood) mixed with semen and blood. These sculptures are paired in the same gallery with a sound piece by Nour Mobarak of recordings made from inside her vagina while pregnant.

According to another wall text, Michigan artist Ash Arder, in *Consumables* (2023) has placed in a refrigerator "Cadillac hood ornaments–objects that suggest stability and status–cast in perishable, nourishing materials including butter, shea butter, and chocolate."

Ever since Marcel Duchamp hung an inverted urinal on a gallery wall, signed it "R. Mutt" and called it *Fountain* in 1917, the direct use of everyday objects, called "ready-mades" has been a means to challenge (and originally to shock) viewers into questioning what makes an object "art."

In the aftermath of the unprecedented decimation wrought by World War One—the use of poison gas, machine guns, trench warfare—war had reached a level of barbarity never hitherto seen. Masses of people experienced it as the collapse of bourgeois rule, and in Russia a revolution by the working class successfully overthrew the rotten capitalist order. This tumultuous period found expression in many forms of art—from Dada to Constructivism and Abstraction—which sought new forms for new, generally rebellious social content.

But more than a hundred years on, with performance and other forms of ephemeral non-object based art added to the mix in the 1960s-70s—these forms of conceptual art have become compulsory. Rather than serving to express new social content, if anything their purpose is to numb us to old social content, requiring ever more elaborate gimmicks.

However, the weakness of these artistic forms in the face of contemporary content is not simply an aesthetic issue. Not to say that artists in any period must directly depict world events. Art is to serve, in the words of Soviet art critic Aleksander Voronsky, as the cognition, not merely the reproduction, of life. However, in order to do so, artists (and not just artists) must be trained to perceive that world. And in this respect, the present, and one might add the previous generation or two of artists has been severely handicapped.

The majority of artists chosen for the biennial are millennials; about 60 percent were born after 1980. In their short lifetimes, they have lived through the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the theft of an election in 2000 that marked the effective surrender of the bourgeoisie's defense of democratic forms of rule, the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the eruption of US imperialism in the Middle East to secure its vast energy resources through wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, the financial crisis of 2008 set off by the defaults in US subprime mortgages, the initial emergence of mass uprisings in Egypt and workers struggle against austerity in the US and Europe, followed by a world-wide pandemic estimated to have left 30 million dead and hundreds of millions disabled by Long COVID.

Now in the opening stages of World War Three, the ruling class resorts to fascist dictatorships led by Trump in the US, and in Europe and other countries as well, to put down opposition by the working class on an international scale. Revolutionary upheaval is on the agenda.

The generation of artists represented in the biennial has been assaulted without cease by various forms of postmodernist, irrationalist and anti-historical conceptions. Through no individual fault of their own, they have absorbed this retrograde and often puerile nourishment, "like mother's milk." One museum sums up some of the basic ideas:

> Postmodernism was born of skepticism and a suspicion of reason. It challenged the notion that there are universal certainties or truths. Postmodern art drew on philosophy of the mid to late twentieth century, and advocated that individual experience and interpretation of our experience was more concrete than abstract principles. …
>
> Because postmodernism broke the established rules about style, it introduced a new era of freedom and a sense that 'anything goes'. Often funny, tongue-in-cheek or ludicrous; it can be confrontational and controversial, challenging the boundaries of taste; but most crucially, it reflects a self-awareness of style itself.

A critical role has been played by identity politics which has become the de facto outlook of many in the present generation of artists, serving to further disorient both them and their audience, drawn particularly among the better off layers of the middle-class. The single-minded fixation on race, gender and sexuality in order to marginalize class as the decisive factor under capitalism, serves to channel opposition as it emerges back into the arms of the pseudo-left with all its favorite catch phrases and pieties—the patriarchy, white male privilege, colonialism, land-use acknowledgements, pronoun preferences, etc.

As in previous biennials, there were a few pieces worthy of note, though fewer and harder to find. It is significant that these works were by older artists and/or by those from counties that have been held under US occupation, as the curators correctly broadened the definition of American to include.

The photographs of Mao Ishikawa (b. 1953 in Okinawa under US Administration, lives in Okinawa, Japan) from the series Red Flowers, 1975-77, were taken after the US had returned Okinawa to Japan in 1972, but still maintained a significant military presence. The photos are of primarily black soldiers in bars with women who worked there, including Ishikawa. Likewise her series *Life in Philly (*1986) taken when she visited a friend, a former soldier in Philadelphia, stood out for their candor and sympathy, underlining the commonality of working class life in places far removed from each other.

Among the few paintings, *Look Where I Took You* (2026) is a cityscape painted by Ali Eyal (b. 1994 in Baghdad) entirely from childhood memory. Just before the Iraq War began in 2003, when Eyal was nine, his mother took him and his two sisters to the largest amusement park in Baghdad so they could see the city one last time before leaving the country (and one might add, before US imperialism's "shock and awe" campaign destroyed much of it.) Much of Eyal's work reflects and continues to grapple with his PTSD from the Iraq War.

It also must be borne in mind that the artists selected by the curators, while diverse according to identity politics criteria—half women, (though apparently not as many black women artists as previous years,) one third queer, mostly living in Los Angeles or New York, primarily Brooklyn—are not necessarily representative of all artists making work today. The role of censorship of artists with outspoken political viewpoints, even when not directly expressed in their work, must be taken into account.

Artists who are outspoken in their political views but do not embrace identity politics are routinely excluded by the curators who serve as gate-keepers of the art world. In selecting work for the 2026 Biennial, the Whitney's fear of retribution from Trump should the art appear critical of him has a real basis, as evidenced by the recent takeover of the Kennedy Center. On the other hand, the museum must not offend its wealthy, often liberal benefactors—many of whom support Zionism.

Last year, officials at the Whitney suspended the museum's Independent Study Program (ISP) for 2025-26, confronted with widespread criticism and protest over its censoring of a pro-Palestinian event.

Hence Trump, fascism, war, ICE, illegal detentions, immigrants, strikes are never depicted even obliquely at the 2026 Biennial. Nor are the terms capitalism, imperialism, war, genocide, let alone socialism, ever used. The Whitney made sure that its curators picked art that is "weird" but not too specific beyond that.

While the Whitney's 2025 gala paled in comparison to the Metropolitan Museum's recent extravaganza, they are of essentially the same character. Packed with billionaires and their children, hedge-fund managers, investment bankers, real-estate tycoons and arms manufacturers, the absolute dependence of culture and the arts upon the largesse of the oligarchy weighs heavily on what art is shown, seen or even produced.

Today the Whitney's board includes Laurie M. Tisch, another billionaire heir to the Loews fortune and 50 percent owner of the New York Giants, a cousin to the current head of the New York City police department Jessica Tisch. The board chair is Fern Kaye Tessler, wife of Lenard B. Tessler, vice chairman of Cerberus Capital Management, a private equity firm invested in the Sparton Corporation, which makes anti-submarine warfare devices for the U.S. Navy, and in Navistar Defense, which supplies armored vehicles to Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

In 2018, an outcry over board member Warren Kanders' wealth being derived from the manufacture of teargas weapons forced his resignation. A subsequent protest by artists in the 2024 Biennial against the genocide was shut down in under an hour.

This effective censorship of artists who do not conform is exemplified by the case of Samia Halaby.

At age 89, Halaby is the oldest artist included in this year's biennial. Born in Jerusalem during the British Mandate, Halaby and her family fled the *Nakba* in 1948, moving first to Beirut and then to the United States, where she grew up in Cincinnati. After attending Michigan State University, she got her Master's Degree from Indiana University.

A pioneer in many ways, Halaby embraced abstraction not merely as a style, but because of its origins in the Russian Revolution. In the 1980s, she experimented with coding on an Amiga computer to create what she called "kinetic" paintings. Yet, in spite of her accomplishments, Halaby describes being ignored by the art world throughout the 1980s and '90s to such an extent that she chose to focus on political activism, and found work in academia, becoming the first female professor at Yale School of Art, and organizing a number of significant exhibits and books on Palestinian art.

One might argue that by including her work, the Whitney is finally giving the artist her due. But if so, it is arguably too understated and long overdue. Showing only her computer generated work made forty years ago, the wall-text barely mentions the recent censorship of a lifetime retrospective at her alma mater Indiana University in 2023. The show was cancelled at the last minute, not because the abstract work referenced the genocide in any way, but because Halaby continues to be outspoken in defense of the Palestinian people.

However, even against such odds, artwork does emerge that is genuine, aesthetically powerful and which articulates an essential truth of our given moment in time. In previous biennials, the work of photographer Zoe Strauss, the paintings of Henry Taylor and of the recently deceased Celeste Dupuy-Spencer have stood out and endured. At the 2026 Whitney Biennial, that significant piece was the video installation *Until we became fire and fire us*, by Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

Mesmerizing and beautiful, the 3-channel video weaves together scenes of traditional Palestinian song and dance, drawings by Abbas' father from the 1970s-80s in Jerusalem, and other ephemera with images of native plants, particularly thistles and cacti, which remain after a village has been destroyed. With lines of poetry overlaid in different sequences, on each channel, the video is a visual poem about loss and resisting what the wall text calls "erasure."

By substituting the word "erasure" for genocide and the focus on native plants rather than people, Abbas and Abou-Rahme's piece manages to elude the radar of censorship. What it evokes is deeply embedded in Palestine as a land and the Palestinians as a people but is not exclusive to that experience. It stood out as one of the handful of works genuinely worth seeing at the 2026 Biennial.

We can anticipate that in the near future such work will no longer be the exception. As Samia Halaby succinctly observed in an interview with the Guardian, "Art was [and is] about the society, for the society, with the society. And it's at its best when society is in revolution."