

**Whitney Biennial 2017**  
 Whitney Museum of  
 American Art, New York  
 March 17 – June 11, 2017  
 by *Rose Bouthillier*

There's a thrumming pulse to the Whitney Biennial 2017 – a lucid, bodily insistence. Co-curated by Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, the exhibition skews decidedly younger and more diverse than recent iterations.<sup>1</sup> Many of the 63 featured artists and collectives have been given substantial amounts of space in the museum's new building, with the exhibition stretching across two entire floors, the theatre, terraces and interstitial spaces throughout. Individual subjectivity, conflict and community are major threads, all pointing to larger questions about how we know (and create and fail and deny) one another and ourselves. This Biennial was developed during a protracted period of civil unrest and political hysteria, and opened during the first months of a tumultuous and divisive administration. How do you hold up a mirror to a country that has trouble recognizing itself these days? Locks asserts in her catalogue essay that the works on view remind us that we have the *capacity* “to consider more imaginative ways of being human together.” At times, it feels like more of a *responsibility*.

GCC's sculptural installation *Local police find fruit with spells* (2017) is first seen from the street as a curious yellow orb hovering over the city from the museum's fifth-floor terrace. The work relates to a viral video uploaded by the Sharjah Police, who were called in to neutralize a washed-up melon bearing

marks of black magic ritual (outlawed in the United Arab Emirates). With its foreign incantations and sketched body punctured with nails, GCC's billboard-sized upscale of the object speaks to rising Islamophobia stoked for political gain. It's also a false front — the side facing the museum is flat and black — in keeping with the collective's interest in the gaps between what is outwardly presented and inwardly known.

Cauleen Smith's opulent banners are the first works encountered in the museum's lobby, making proclamations with resolute but ambiguous text (“Black” – “Stop” – “I cannot be fixed”) paired with blazing motifs of eyes, blood and eight balls. Satin, velvet, sparkly and embellished, they merge protest with regal celebration. Another procession of sorts, Ajay Kurian's *Chilidermass* (2017) leads viewers up the museum's main staircase with strange, cartoonish figures clinging and dangling from ropes — a giant, puffy white toddler; chrome chameleon; moon-headed and masked adolescents. The installation calls up gym-class rivalry as a metaphor for class warfare; some of these creatures seem to fiendishly thrive on the tumult itself, while others appear resigned, defeated.

Very much of its moment, the Biennial has a strong sense of immediacy, at times laced with notes of claustrophobia. This finds intense expression in Postcommodity's *A Very Long Line* (2016), a four-channel video of fences lining the US–Mexico border that was shot from a moving car. Projected on enclosing walls, the piece centres viewers in a dizzying cube of containment. Pope.L aka William Pope.L's installation *Claim* (2017) stands as a room apart, covered top to bottom, inside and out, with a gridded array of bologna, the slices push-pinned to the wall, weeping and curling as they cure. Each also has a dollop of paint and a small, blurry black-and-white image of a person on it. The “logic” of the piece is delivered via a framed letter-sized sheet of paper, hung next to an open bottle of Mad Dog 20/20

<sup>1</sup> Lew and Locks also consulted with an advisory team, led by Scott Rothkopf and including Negar Azimi, Gean Moreno, Aily Nash (also co-curator of the film program) and Wendy Yao.



Installation view of Cauleen Smith, *In the Wake*, 2017, mixed media, 16 components, each 23.6 x 19 cm. Whitney Biennial 2017, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. COURTESY CORBETT VS DEMPSEY, CHICAGO AND KATE WERBLE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Habanero Lime-Arita. The 2,755 slices of bologna represent 25 percent of New York's Jewish population; the portraits, however, are taken of random people who may or may not be Jewish, and the number is off by 2, and several slices have been removed. "When we quantify," the statement opens, "we point with a wavering finger." Gridded order gives way to the sticky absurdity of categorizing one another.

In the days and weeks after the Biennial's opening, Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016), an abstracted rendering of lynched African American teenager Emmet Till, became subject to petitions and heated debates on appropriation, exploitation, artistic freedom and censorship. In 1955, photographs of Till's disfigured body – bravely released to the public by his mother – became a flashpoint in the civil rights movement. There are few images that convey such vulnerability, horror and historical weight, and the painting fitfully articulates its own inadequacy and trespass. I saw the protests before I read about them; a wall of young artists standing in front of the work, engaging visitors in discussion. This obscuring from view felt critical and profound, exposing the painting, and its conditions. It also stressed something about a particular mode of seeing in art galleries, of not really registering other people, a selective blindness allowing for exclusive focus on one's own experience.

The exhibition's violent undertones reach fever pitch in Jordan Wolfson's virtual reality piece, *Real Violence* (2017). Fast, brutal and terrifying, it drops the viewer in close proximity to a vicious beating (carried out by the artist) on a sidewalk in broad daylight (the victim is an animatronic doll enhanced in post-production). Part of me was expecting to discount the work as a cheap shock, but I couldn't deny the affect it wrought: the dizziness, gutting sickness, awareness of my own body, vulnerability and reflexes. It burrows into your brain with a sharpness that also disorients and dulls. It's no accident that the verdant environs of Asad Raza's *Root sequence, Mother tongue* (2017) installation are situated immediately nearby, the warm light and humid air – suffused with customized scents – offering therapeutic comfort. Home to 26 trees of different species, the

red-carpeted room is occupied by a cast of caretakers who tend to visitors as well as the trees, and who punctuate the planter boxes with their own personal belongings. There's an affable sincerity to the room, but it verges on saccharine after Wolfson's bitter pill.

The Biennial features a good deal of painting, but much of it gets lost amid the boisterousness. Works by Henry Taylor are exceptions, for their sheer size, and undeniable physicality. Taylor's towering tableaux include one of Philando Castile that seems to suspend time, to ache for its reversal (when the Biennial closes in June, not even a year will have passed since Castile was fatally shot by a police officer during a traffic stop). Some quieter moments hold their own in the fray, such as Harold Mendez's poignant array of two and three-dimensional works. These include *Elmina Castle* (2016), a tightly-cropped photograph of a departure port used in the slave trade, and *American Pictures* (2016), a stump of wood, pierced by wrought iron and coated with blood-red pigment of cochineal beetles, framed by a metal grate and strewn with carnation petals. Mendez's works distill fragility, distress, cruelty and endurance into haunting material forms.

While photography and moving images suffuse the exhibition (Oto Gillen's *New York* [2015–ongoing] and Lyle Ashton Harris' installation *Once (Now) Again* [2017]) bring personal worlds to life through steady image flows), other forms of digital technology have a lighter presence. Irena Haiduk's slick, mirrored network tower provides access to a web app hosted on a .YU domain, through which female-identified visitors can join the *Frauenbank* (2017) cooperative and put money towards the purchase of collectively owned land in the former Yugoslavia. Porpentine Charity Heartscape's obscene, poetic computer games can be played in private cubicles, treating players to rollicking, hyper-textual mindfucks.

Economic unease is highlighted in different ways: in the newest version of their *Debtfair* project, Occupy Museums charts student loan delinquency, the ArtPrice Global Index and assets managed by BlackRock Inc., in a graph incised into a gallery wall. For *Public Money* (2017) Cameron Rowland directed the museum to invest \$25,000 in a Social Impact



Installation view of *Puppies Puppies, Liberty (Liberté)*, 2017, Whitney Biennial 2017, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. PHOTO: MATTHEW CARASELLA.

Bond, a recent development in government oversight that allows for social good programs like recidivism reduction to be privately invested in, with returns based on presumed public savings. Frances Stark's paintings, blown up from pages of Ian F. Svenonius' book *Censorship Now!!* (2015), drive home the point that "free" speech is bought and paid for in a capital-driven society. There's clearly a mounting anxiety towards economic systems and the disparities they create, often no more glaring than in institutions that rely on free artistic labour. In the exhibition catalogue, note is made that the curators insisted, for the first time in the Biennial's history, that all of the artists be paid – but they are clear to state it amounted to a "symbolic acknowledgement." Why only this?

On my last day in New York, I returned to the museum to see Puppies Puppies' *Liberty (Liberté)* (2017), which the artist aptly describes as "a drag performance and sculpture," on the eighth floor terrace (outside of scheduled hours on the weekends, the Statue of Liberty costume is sometimes filled by a mannequin). It was an unusually cold and windy day, and locking eyes with the person behind the stoic mask, I thought I sensed desperation (maybe only weariness?). Or perhaps I was projecting, as this moment seemed to say something so clear about all of the contradictions and compromises and aspirations of the Biennial, and the country itself.

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