

Mitter, Siddhartha, "The Whitney Biennial Called. How Will They Answer?," *NYTimes.com*, May 9, 2019

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The Whitney Biennial Called. How Will They Answer?

For these eight first-time artists participating in the biennial, it's a surefire résumé builder. But it also exposes them to heightened scrutiny.

By Siddhartha Mitter | May 9, 2019



From left, Meriem Bennani, Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Calvin Marcus, Maia Ruth Lee, Todd Gray, Sofia Gallisá Muriente, Nicholas Galanin and Tomashi Jackson. Photographs by Christopher Gregory (Bennani, McClodden, Lee, Muriente, Jackson); Brian Guido (Marcus, Gray); and Ben Huff (Galanin) all for The New York Times

When Tiona Nekkia McClodden, a Philadelphia-based filmmaker and installation artist, was invited to take part in this year's Whitney Biennial, she felt satisfaction, but also crippling panic.

On one hand Ms. McClodden, 37, was coming off well-received film and performance projects in New York that had explored black queer culture in the 1980s. But the work had run its course. "I was having this chaotic meltdown," she said.

What new work would she make?

Selection in the Whitney Biennial instantly marks an artist as a figure at the forefront of American contemporary art. For young selectees like Ms. McClodden — three quarters of this year's roster of 75 artists are under 40 — it is a surefire résumé and market builder. By the same token, it exposes them to inevitable political stakes and heightened scrutiny.

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The Biennial is sometimes provocative by design: the 1993 edition famously landed in the midst of the culture wars with a barrage of in-your-face art asserting race, gender, and sexual identities. Other years have sparked more specific confrontations, as the last one did, in 2017, over a rendering by the painter Dana Schutz of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy who was lynched in Mississippi in 1955.

This year, not only is the national political climate tense, but so too are institutional debates around the Whitney itself. The group Decolonize This Place has convened performance-like protests in the museum's lobby. They demand that the institution remove its vice chairman of the board, Warren B. Kanders, who is the chief executive of Safariland, a company that makes law-enforcement products like tear gas.

Although just one invited artist, Michael Rakowitz, withdrew from the Biennial in response to the activists' initial request, nearly 50 participants in the show have added their names to an open letter calling for Mr. Kanders' removal.

And some participants may charge the issues head-on. The art and research group Forensic Architecture, for instance, has signaled that its work will address the Kanders controversy directly.

Still, recent visits with eight of the first-time participants in the Biennial — six studio visits, in three cities, and two by video — found them completing work that made its social points subtly, without polemics. They were well aware of the debates swirling around the show, which opens May 17; four of them signed the open letter. But their work channeled other energies: research, technique, play, ritual. If anything, the artists we met seemed to seek areas of calm — for the viewer, for themselves.

Ms. McClodden, who is black, queer, and grew up in South Carolina, has had little patience for the recent protests, which she sees as parochial. Her new work, which draws deeply on African-rooted spiritual practices, lays down a different gauntlet. "This is a chance to comment on what the range of American art can be," she said. "This is art that challenges the limitations of the building that it's in." It is far from a scientific sample but auguries point to a 2019 Whitney Biennial that has the potential to show creative ways forward, for the culture — and maybe even the country.

The curators, Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta, acknowledged that organizing the show in the current social climate and following the last edition's blowup was a challenging task.

"We took our responsibility very seriously in light of previous Biennials," Ms. Panetta said. "It felt a little daunting at first." In visiting artists over 14 weeks, traveling around the country, they found more optimism than they expected. "Over time you have to start thinking about creative possibilities, and we saw that in a lot of artists we met," Ms. Panetta said.

The exhibition's impact will be clear only once it is up, of course. But here is a preview of what we saw as eight artists' sketches, models and images — their dreams — came to life.

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Calvin Marcus

"I ... hope that art helps recalibrate."



Mr. Marcus in his Los Angeles studio with paintings that will be shown in the Whitney Biennial.
Brian Guido for The New York Times

Eight-foot-tall canvases lined the walls in Calvin Marcus's studio in Los Angeles, with another in progress on the floor. Each composition hinted at some self-contained allegory. A wrinkled, old man lifted weights in the gym as a younger face hovered — clearly a musing on age. Others were more cryptic: a group of donkeys silhouetted in the night; a cartoonlike space alien, flipping a quarter.

"If there's any story, it's all happening within the picture," Mr. Marcus, who is 30, said. Previously he painted in series, giving each work a number instead of a title. The new pieces, made in watercolor, stood alone. "In a way it feels more difficult," he said.

Mr. Marcus earned his M.F.A. at U.C.L.A., and was in the process of closing down his studio before moving from gentrifying Montecito Heights into central Los Angeles. Some of the vignettes that inspired his new paintings came from observations around L.A., he said. Others were pure flights of fancy. The common trait was a sense of the uncanny, of absurd possibilities lurking within ordinary moments.

"It's not so much social as personal," he said. "I'm usually just discovering as I make it." Still, he ventured: "So many things feel unchangeable because of history, or politics. I try to get people to question their daily surroundings, and hope that art helps recalibrate."